

2019

# The Lived Experiences of Emotionally Forgiving Abusive Parents

Chelsea Bryant  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Chelsea Bryant

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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

The Lived Experiences of Emotionally Forgiving Abusive Parents

by

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MA, University of Mobile, 2014

BS, American Public University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology With Teaching Option

Walden University

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## Abstract

The subject of forgiveness has been heavily explored during the past few decades; however, limited research has been conducted on the phenomenology of emotional forgiveness, the internal process of replacing negative feelings with positive feelings. This study explored the emotional forgiveness experiences of 7 adult men who were previous victims of abuse by their parents. Using Moustakas's phenomenological research approach, the participants were interviewed about their experiences of emotional forgiving their abusive parents. The recall, empathize, altruism, commitment, and holding on, REACH forgiveness model and family systems theory were the conceptual frameworks to explore the central research question, which addressed the meaning of emotional forgiveness in adult males. The interview data were coded and grouped into themes of shared meaning. The results revealed 8 distinct themes: coping, evolution of emotions, substance abuse, cognitive distortions, making meaning of the abuse, forgiving because Christ first forgave me, and God's grace. Further, the lived experiences revealed that emotional forgiveness was largely dependent on the adult male's acceptance of their difficulty to emotionally forgive and seeking God's grace to help them emotionally forgive their abusive parent. Results of this study have the potential to benefit adult males who struggle to emotionally forgive their abusive parent by providing insights into the emotional forgiveness experience. Furthermore, the results from this study can be shared with the professional community to help them understand the phenomenon of adult males who have survived an abusive parent.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mentor, colleague, and most importantly, my friend, Dr. Tom Bevill, for teaching me what it means to honor God, supporting me in the most difficult moments of my life, and encouraging me to be me. Next, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my loving husband, Tony Bryant, for his unconditional patience and grace extended while I worked to achieve my educational goals and dreams.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Researchers have begun to examine forgiveness during the past few decades than they have in previous years. Fow (1998), Halling (2006), and Rowe (1989) have even begun to explore the lived experiences of forgiveness. Halling (1994) studied the phenomenology of shame and its influence on forgiveness, and Ferch (2000) shared findings of the lived experiences of touch and its role in forgiveness. Many other researchers, such as Baver et al. (1992), have explored self-forgiveness; however, limited research exists on the phenomenology of emotional forgiveness, the internal process of replacing negative feelings toward an offender with positive feelings (Watkins et al., 2011).

In this chapter, I present the background of the study, including the literature noting the differentiation of emotional and decisional forgiveness, potential challenges faced when forgiveness is not extended to abusive parents, and recent findings of emotional forgiveness in alternative populations. I present the problem statement, purpose of the study, and the phenomenon of interest. I then pose the central research question guiding this study, along with a description of the nature of the study, theoretical framework, and potential social significance.

### **Background**

During the relatively brief history of psychology, a paucity of literature on forgiveness exists. Forgiveness was not only scarce in psychological literature but in all other areas of academia (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Forgiveness has always been a necessity for humankind's overall spiritual development in certain

religions. Faith based treatment groups and clergy previously believed forgiveness was a necessary antidote to pathological guilt because those treatment models assumed it to be the cause of most psychopathology (Lyons, Deane, Caputi, & Kelly, 2011).

Schimmenti, Passanisi, Di Carlo, and Caretti (2014) have explored the relationship between unhealthy familial relationships and psychopathic traits in a group of violent offenders from Italy. Schimmenti et al. had 78 participants in their study using the traumatic experience checklist and the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). A total of 66% of the participants reported sustaining one type of abuse in childhood, and 17% reported all three types of ill treatment (Schimmenti et al., 2014). Schimmenti et al. concluded that emotional abuse is a positive predictor in the PCL-R. Schimmenti et al. also showed similar trends of how unresolved issues with abusive parents can manifest into severe psychological illnesses. Schimmenti et al. suggested that the combination of temperamental and neurobiological vulnerabilities can foster psychopathic traits.

Forgiveness has been examined in the context of self-forgiveness and how religion can aid in healing emotional scars. Self-forgiveness is defined as forgiving one's involvement in an offense by expressing kindness and generosity towards oneself (Cornish & Wade, 2015). Bryan, Theriault, and Bryan (2014) stated that for a person to forgive another person, one must first be able to forgive oneself for the role he or she played in the transgression. Forgiving one's involvement in a transgression will allow kindness and generosity to replace any negative feelings the individual may be harboring against oneself (Bryan et al., 2014).

Reinert, Campbell, Bandeen-Roche, Sharps, and Lee (2015) examined racial and gender differences regarding religious influence as a mediator of early traumatic stress (ETS) on the quality of life in adults who have survived poor relations with their parents due to abuse. In addition, Reinert et al. studied similar variables of how religious beliefs can help heal emotional scars of childhood stressors. Reinert et al. used a cross-sectional predictive design, and the sample consisted of 10,283 Seventh-Day Adventist adults in North America. The methods included questionnaires implementing secondary analysis using multiple regression (Reinert et al., 2015). Results indicated physical abuse prevalence was equal between both genders, and females had a considerably higher frequency for all other forms of ETS.

Watkins et al. (2011) examined the distinction between emotional and decisional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness was measured using the emotional forgiveness scale (EFS) in 221 undergraduate college students from Nepal (Watkins et al., 2011). Watkins et al. also recognized forgiveness as two distinct processes. Decisional forgiveness is a choice to decrease negative opinions and behaviors toward a transgressor (Watkins et al., 2011). Decisional forgiveness can potentially lead to restoration of a relationship. An individual can accomplish decisional forgiveness without emotionally forgiving the transgressor (Watkins et al., 2011). Emotional forgiveness is the internal process of replacing negative feelings towards an offender with positive feelings (Watkins et al., 2011). These feelings could include empathy, love, and compassion. Forgiveness had a strong correlation with conciliatory behavior and motivations for avoidance and revenge toward the offender (Watkins et al., 2011). Decisional forgiveness showed a stronger

predictor for revenge and avoidance toward the offender than did emotional forgiveness (Watkins et al., 2011).

Lichtenfeld et al. (2015) explored the difference between emotional and decisional forgiveness on forgetting. The sample included 42 undergraduate students who were all female with an average age of 22 years. One of the limitations of this study was that the population studied did not include both sexes. It was recommended to replicate the study including men to determine whether the results were generalizable across sexes (Lichtenfeld et al., 2015). The data indicated that emotional forgiveness leads to significantly higher levels of forgetting (Lichtenfeld et al., 2015). The increased levels of forgetting means that individuals who have emotionally forgiven abuse, rather than people who choose to decide to forgive, have a significantly higher probability of forgetting traits relevant to the abuse and abuser (Lichtenfeld et al., 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Lichtenfeld, Buechner, Maier, and Fernandez-Capo (2015) examined forgiveness in two distinct categories: decisional and emotional. Decisional forgiveness is a choice to decrease negative opinions and behaviors toward a transgressor as opposed to replacing negative feelings with positive feelings as one would do during emotional forgiveness. One limitation of their findings is Lichtenfeld et al. sampled a female population. Sampling exclusively females does not allow the results to be generalized across genders (Lichtenfeld et al., 2015). Gender differences in emotional forgiveness can be expected for several reasons. Gender differences could be an artifact of methodological factors, the way emotional forgiveness is being studied as opposed to emotional forgiveness itself



(Miller et al., 2008). Dispositional qualities may be related to emotional forgiveness responses as well as affective traits affecting responses to situations (Miller et al., 2008). Miller et al. (2008) stated that gender differences could be identified in different attachment styles that influence emotional forgiveness as well as individual differences in coping skills. Men are more drawn toward justice-based morality emphasizing justice, vengeance, and fighting, whereas women are drawn toward warmth-based virtues (Miller et al., 2008). Walker and Doverspike (2001) concluded that emotional forgiveness is motivated by religion and women tend to be more religious.

I guided my study by similar research conducted of women's lived experiences who emotionally forgive and addressed the gender gap examining specifically men's lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. Emotional forgiveness was defined using Worthington's REACH forgiveness model (Worthington et al., 2010). I selected Worthington's REACH forgiveness model to guide this research due to its established reliability and validity within the subject of forgiveness (Davis et al., 2015; Worthington et al., 2014). REACH is an acronym for recall, empathize, altruism, committing, and holding on. According to the model, an individual has achieved emotional forgiveness after successfully completing the five steps associated with REACH (Worthington et al., 2010). Researchers have posited that emotional forgiveness is an important factor to an individual's well-being. Ehrensaft, Cohen, Knous-Westfall, and Chen (2014) have identified damages that can affect future generations if emotional forgiveness is not achieved. These damages can include emotional disengagement affecting emotional regulation and emotional availability (Ehrensaft et al., 2014).

Examining the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents could provide additional understanding to this phenomenon as well as increase physical and mental health and life satisfaction in families for future generations (Davis et al., 2015; Ehrensaft et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2008).

### **Purpose**

My purpose in this research was to explore the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents. Hook et al. (2015), Davis et al. (2015), and Worthington et al. (2010) studied emotional forgiveness in a variety of capacities. Hook et al. and Davis et al. observed university men and women in the United States and how they emotionally forgive. Worthington et al. studied emotional forgiveness in the workplace and found that the lack of forgiveness hinders communication within organizations. However, the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents is something that needs further exploration. Through this study, I will not only add to the limited pool of knowledge of men's lived experiences of emotional forgiveness, but I will also aid in substantiating the research that has already been published using this population.

### **Research Questions**

1. RQ1 (Qualitative): What are the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Everett Worthington's REACH forgiveness model was the theoretical framework that I used to guide my research, and I used this model to define emotional forgiveness.

Worthington created five steps that individuals can take toward emotional forgiveness. Worthington et al. (2014) explained why individuals first need to remember the pain and suffering another has inflicted upon oneself. The victim will be better equipped to show empathy toward the transgressor when the victim can try to understand the offender's viewpoint (Worthington et al., 2010). When the participant can recall a time when he or she caused pain and suffering toward another and then received forgiveness, he or she can be mentally and emotionally prepared to offer the same forgiveness. The participant achieves committing when the participant publicly forgives the transgressor (Greer, Worthington, Griffin, & Yin Lin, 2014). Last, the participant needs to hold on to his or her choice to forgive instead of the pain once felt. Davis et al. (2015) reinforced Worthington's theory that after making a decision to forgive a transgression, an emotional forgiveness occurs that works to reframe how the individual perceives the transgressor and his or her offense. The reframe replaces negative emotions with positive ones such as empathy, love, and compassion.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was phenomenological. A phenomenology study is a way of understanding a particular phenomenon such as lived experiences of emotional forgiveness, which was my focus in this study. Consistent with the Davis et al.'s (2015) REACH forgiveness model, men can stop concentrating on the abuse committed by their parents by keeping their focus on how negative emotions can potentially be reframed into positive ones. This phenomenological analysis helped me to further explore the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents.

## Definitions

*Childhood emotional abuse:* Verbal attacks by an adult that humiliates or degrades a child, resulting in negative effects on the child's well-being or self-worth (Bernstein et al., 2003).

*Childhood physical abuse:* Physical assaults that place the child at risk for bodily injury by an adult (Bernstein et al., 2003).

*Childhood sexual abuse:* Sexual conduct between a minor and an adult (Bernstein et al., 2003).

*Decisional forgiveness:* A commitment by the offended to decrease negative thoughts and behaviors toward a transgressor (Brauns, 2008; Davis et al., 2015).

*Emotional forgiveness:* A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person by replacing negative feelings with positive thoughts and behaviors toward a transgressor, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated (Brauns, 2008; Davis et al., 2015).

*Emotionally abusive parent:* Verbal attacks by a parent as defined by APA that humiliates or degrades his or her child, resulting in negative effects on the child's well-being or self-worth (APA, 2017; Bernstein et al., 2003)

*Forgiveness:* A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated (Brauns, 2008).

*Parent:* According to the APA, a parent is an individual responsible for caring and making sure their child is healthy, safe, equip them with essential skills and resources

required to succeed as an adult, and teach basic cultural values to them (APA, 2017). APA (2017) stated that a parent provides the most intimate context for protection and nurturing for children as they develop identities and personalities and mature socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically. Parents offer love, guidance, encouragement, acceptance, and appreciation to their children (APA, 2017)

*Physically abusive parent:* Physical assaults on a child committed by his or her parent as defined by APA that place the child at risk for bodily injury by an adult (APA, 2017; Bernstein et al., 2003).

*Sexually abusive parent:* Sexual conduct between a minor and his or her parent as defined by APA (APA, 2017; Bernstein et al., 2003).

### **Assumptions**

Phenomenological researchers assume that discernments can be obtained from interviews with participants who express the lived experience of the phenomena in question (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). For this study, I assumed that the selected adult men claiming to be abused by their parents were able to communicate these experiences in a way that would contribute to the body of research. In addition, a researcher using a phenomenological study assumes that participants will share their experiences honestly (Patton, 2002). I established trust and rapport so participants were comfortable in accurately reporting their experiences. I also assumed that I am capable of setting aside any and all presumptions and potential biases held regarding the research question. I will address the risk of researcher bias in Chapter 3.

I assumed particular details relevant to this study that are not yet confirmed. I assumed that familial relationships were disrupted negatively when the child was abused by his parent. I assumed that the adult men believed the treatment from and relationship with his parent was inconsistent with how APA defines the parental role and relationship. I also assumed that the adult men thought this inconsistency between the reality of their parent and what APA says a parent should be was deserving of emotional forgiveness. My final assumption was that the gathered information regarding lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents would increase physical and mental health and life satisfaction in families for future generations.

### **Scopes and Delimitations**

The lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents was my focus of this study. As stated earlier and expounded further in Chapter 2, there was potential risk for abused children to live out their lives without extending emotional forgiveness to their abusive parent. In this study, I aimed to explore how adult men lived the experience of emotionally forgiving their abusive parents. The experience of emotionally forgiving abusive parents from the adult child's perspective provides insight on the emotional forgiveness process and potential gender differences since the majority of previous research on emotional forgiveness has been conducted on women.

The research participants were limited to a purposeful sample of adult men living in Texas (my home state) or elsewhere in the United States who are respondents to participation invitations distributed by my professional colleagues or receiving services through local universities or community mental health agencies. I speculated that

willingness and ability to be recorded during face-to-face or telephone interviews might hinder participation of potential participants and lead others to decline participation.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies are evaluated by a specific set of criteria. One criterion by which qualitative studies are evaluated is transferability (Patton, 2002). Transferability is the degree to which a reader is able to interpret research results as relevant and meaningful (Patton, 2002). Findings are specific to each situation in small samples in qualitative research. Therefore, findings in qualitative research are not generalized to larger populations (Patton, 2002). To increase transferability, I achieved saturation of themes and codes with additional analysis of participants as needed and provided detailed descriptions that may aid in the reader's understanding. Qualitative methodological literature suggests that between six and 10 participants is a reasonable estimate to achieve saturation (Moustakas, 1994). I identified saturation during the data analysis process when I discovered no new themes or concepts.

Trustworthiness is essential in the quality of qualitative research. Patton (2002) included four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As the researcher, I took appropriate measures to ensure credibility, confirming that the findings precisely reflect the phenomenon in question. I accomplished this by following Shenton's (2004) strategies. First, I developed interview questions using the questions from the interpersonal relationship resolution scale as a guide based upon feedback for qualitative methodological experts and peer-reviewed literature. I familiarized myself of the culture of adults who were abused by their parents through

relevant literature and members in the community. While obtaining informed consent, I gave participants the opportunity to refuse and/or discontinue participation at any time. Due to the thoroughness of the consent, it is a reasonable assumption that participants reported experiences to the best of their knowledge. I rephrased questions and revisited previously covered questions to enhance accuracy with responses and ensure consistency. Last, Guba (1981) and Shenton (2004) recommended that I request participants to participate in a member checking process to confirm their experiences were recorded accurately.

I addressed Shenton's (2004) issue of dependability through a detailed account of the research procedures. A thorough account of procedures will enable readers and future researchers to replicate the study as well as have a complete understanding of the research process. I specified the research design plan and implementation as well as data gathering and analysis. To ensure confirmability, Shenton (2004) recommended a meditative journal to document the research process and thoughts regarding research results.

A limitation with qualitative research is the ability of participants to truthfully recollect and communicate their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). I used bracketing to cast away personal biases and preconceived notions (Creswell, 2007). Any preconceived notions about the research question not set aside would pose a potential limitation to the study.

Shenton (2004) described the member checking process as the involvement of participants in evaluating components of the data to confirm their experiences have been



accurately represented. I gave participants their narrative reviews and asked for their verification that the intended meaning was accurately presented to protect against misinterpretation (Gelling, 2010). Gelling (2010) stated that if the participants' experience varies through time, a potential limitation could exist with the time span between data collection and member checking.

### **Significance of Study**

A unique contribution of this study is that I expanded the minimally researched topic of the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. In addition, I contributed to the field by generalizing data for both men and women. Ehrensaft et al. (2014) also looked at the damages that can affect future generations if emotional forgiveness is not achieved. If reframing the men's perception of the parent's abuse using the REACH model leads to emotional forgiveness, it could provide men with a sense of peace and security in a time of emotional turmoil.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. Much has been written about forgiveness and the significance of forgiveness on an individual's well-being during the last couple of decades (Ehrensaft et al., 2014). Relationships within the family have far-reaching implications for the adult child, other family members, and future generations (Bowen, 2004; Ehrensaft et al., 2014). Ehrensaft et al. (2014) identified potential damages when emotional forgiveness is not extended as emotional disengagement affecting emotional regulation and emotional availability (Ehrensaft et al., 2014).

Examining the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents could provide additional understanding to this phenomenon as well as increase physical and mental health and life satisfaction in families for future generations (Davis et al., 2015; Ehrensaft et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2008).

Findings from quantitative studies have been limited to looking at the lived experiences of forgiveness in general, self-forgiveness, forgiveness in women, shame and its influence on forgiveness, and the lived experiences of touch and its influence on forgiveness (Ferch, 2000; Fow, 1998; Halling, 2006; Rowe, 1989). Further, this area lacks a deeper understanding of the phenomenology of the internal process of replacing negative feelings toward an offender with positive feelings (Watkins et al., 2011). As a consequence, the pure and unfiltered experience of those living this phenomenon is the most effective way to better understand the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the related literature. Chapter 3 contains the study's research design and methodology. In Chapter 4, I report the data, and in Chapter 5, I offer interpretation, implications, and conclusions of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

My purpose in this qualitative study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents. For the purpose of this study, emotional forgiveness means a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person by replacing negative feelings with positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward a transgressor; however, not all consequences are necessarily eliminated (Brauns, 2008; Davis et al., 2015).

In the following literature review, I analyze current research and conceptualizations of emotional forgiveness including challenges; emotional, psychological, physiological, and spiritual benefits; attachment; relationship changes; social pressures; and resilience. The review begins with the traditional role and origin of forgiveness. The meaning of emotional forgiveness in specific situational and cultural context is explored. Benefits and barriers to expressing emotional forgiveness and repentance to abusive parents are also discussed.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched the literature and collected data through PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, and SocINDEX databases, as well as general searches on the Web. I used the following key words during the searches: *parents, mother, father, abuse, child abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, abusive parent, abusive family, abusive nuclear family, forgiveness, emotional forgiveness, repentance, REACH forgiveness model,*

*resilience, attachment, Family Systems Theory, American, collectivist culture, individualist culture, and reconciliation.*

### **Why Emotional Forgiveness Is Necessary**

Child abuse has been identified as a pandemic across cultures throughout the world. In addition to its prevalence in the United States, child abuse has been rapidly increasing in African, Asian, and Latin American countries (Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Wilks, Neto, & Mavroveli, 2015; Worthington, 2014). Emotional forgiveness has been identified as a predictor for greater emotional, psychological, and even physical health (McDade et al., 2017). In addition to the individual benefits associated with emotional forgiveness, there are also social profits as well. Emotional forgiveness has a stigma of an act that only martyrs and saints commit; however, emotional forgiveness is something that plays an integral role in the health of families, communities, and nations (Worthington, 2010). The body of literature on this subject is still young; however, has already begun producing powerful implications.

Individuals are not required to forgive their abusers. Victims do not have to change their emotions toward their abusers. However, the negative emotions that follow abuse such as resentment, anger, and vengeance can take its toll on the physical, mental, relational, and spiritual wellbeing of the abused (McCullough et al., 2000; Worthington, 2010). Worthington et al. (2010) observed heart rate, blood pressure, and sweat gland activity in victims of abuse who were asked to recall their abuser. In the victims who had not emotionally forgave their abuser, all three physiological responses recorded an increase.

In an alternative study, the correlation between stress levels and the ability to emotionally forgive a close family member was studied. Worthington (2010) measured cortisol levels in saliva of 39 participants who scored their relationship with their family as either terrific or horrible. Worthington (2010) studied cortisol because it is a hormone that quickly metabolizes fat as a response to stress. After the stress subsides, the fat is put back where it is easily accessible, around the waist. Individuals with poor relationships generally have higher baselines of cortisol and a lower score on a test that measured their willingness to emotionally forgive (Worthington, 2010). When the participants were asked to think about the poor family relationship, the cortisol levels increased (Worthington, 2010). In contrast, participants with healthy family relationships maintained their cortisol levels within normal range. Individuals show to be more willing to emotionally forgive as they age. People older than 45 years who emotionally forgave others report feeling a greater satisfaction with their lives and are less likely to report issues of psychological distress (Worthington, 2010). Though current research proves emotional forgiveness improves one's well-being, it poses the question why does an individual's lack of forgiveness put them at higher psychological and physiological risk.

Assume hostility is a central part of being unforgiving. Hostility has also been identified as a key factor in type A behavior that seems to be responsible for the more malevolent health effects, such as increased risk for cardiovascular disease (Worthington, 2010). Withholding forgiveness has also been linked with having a compromised immune system by disrupting how cells fight off infections and bacteria (Worthington, 2010).

### **Emotional Forgiveness and Relationships**

Emotional forgiveness has shown to be useful in all different types of relationships from family, professional, and romantic relationships. Emotionally forgiving a close parent is not necessarily easier or more difficult than emotionally forgiving strangers who rob or assault others. In any ongoing relationship, forgiveness is different. A present father can make things worse whereas a deceased father cannot be confronted.

A study from the University of North Carolina showed that individuals are more likely to emotionally forgive an abuser if they feel a sense of trust and a willingness to sacrifice from their abuser. The researchers also concluded that emotional forgiveness in marriages is more likely than in relationships with less commitment (Worthington, 2010). The marriage is a symbol of trust. This trust increases the feeling of security for those to put themselves in a vulnerable state by offering emotional forgiveness. The more invested an individual is in a relationship, the more emotionally forgiving they will be toward an abuser (Worthington, 2010). Furthermore, when a family relationship is abused or threatened, their goals for the relationship shift (Worthington, 2010). Prior to the threat or abuse, the family could have professed unconditional love for each other; however, after the threat or abuse the family often turns toward goals of revenge and keeping score. Goals also shift from compromising to winning the argument. The significant abuses are not necessarily unforgiveable because they are significant. Instead, significant abuses are the ones that, if ever to be surmounted, must be forgiven (McCullough et al., 2000).

### **Traditional Role of Emotional Forgiveness**

Emotional forgiveness is traditionally seen as a positive, adaptive process to promote the abandonment of behaviors, cognitions, and feelings of resentment toward one who has caused some degree of pain while fostering feelings, cognitions, and behaviors of compassion and good will toward the offender. The role of emotional forgiveness has been seen as conservational (Maltby, Macaskill, & Gillett, 2007). Individuals who have been abused by a parent often become angry, fearful, resentful, or hurt. Maltby et al. (2007) state people aim to protect themselves through retribution and by obtaining justice for the abuse suffered. It is also argued that emotionally forgiving is a way of maintaining the status quo in the face of threats to the individual's established way of being and perception of the world around them (Maltby et al., 2007).

Current trends in research postulate a globalization of emotional forgiveness. Ho and Fung (2011) asserted that the development of moral reasoning is similar across cultures. Twenty-year-olds to 23-year-olds are more intrinsically motivated to emotionally forgive. In contrast, adolescents are more extrinsically motivated to emotionally forgive abusers. Another trend that Ho and Fung (2011) found was that common predictors of emotional forgiveness have proven the same across cultures. Such predictors include apologies, intentionality, and abuse consequences. Though emotional forgiveness is grounded in similar principles across cultures, Azar and Mullet (2001) argued that culturally unique trends exist in the dimensions of emotionally forgiving.

### **Emotional Forgiveness In Individualist Cultures**

Individualism is a social pattern involving individuals' perceptions of themselves as independent from others. This culture emphasizes individual preferences, rights, and needs. It gives priority to personal goals over group goals. Countries that follow this social pattern include the United States, Germany, Ireland, South Africa, and Australia.

One perspective of emotional forgiveness in individualist cultures is that of weakness, foolishness, submission, or all three. Citizens of America often feel it is easier to denounce or vilify their abusers rather than express empathy or forgiveness to them. The individualist culture holds maintaining justice in high regard. Another characteristic that is depictive of individualist cultures is the competitive nature of its people. This leads to a hesitancy to emotionally forgive at the risk of relinquishing any of the victims assumed power over the abuser. Ho and Fung (2011) stated that emotional forgiveness is perceived as an intrapersonal construct. Emotional forgiveness in this culture relies heavily on the in internal use of language and thought to process and extend emotional forgiveness to the abuser. Also, in individualist cultures neuroticism and agreeableness have been correlated with emotional forgiveness (Ho & Fung, 2011). This trend has not been detected in other cultures. Interpersonal variables have also have indicated divergences among cultures. Americans generally pay more attention to the perceived controllability of the abuser.

In an individualist, people are motivated to seek justice for their abuse. This means people perceive abuse as an injustice. In addition, the abuse perceived as an injustice creates an injustice gap, the perceived gap between the abuse and justice (Ho &



Fung, 2011). Therefore, in individualist cultures, emotional forgiveness is largely motivated by closing the injustice gap and to promote personal healing.

### **Emotional Forgiveness in Collectivist Cultures**

In contrast to individualist cultures, collectivism is a social pattern of closely connected individuals seeing themselves as interdependent with those around them. Collectivism emphasizes social norms, duties, and obligations (Ho & Fung, 2011). This social pattern values social harmony and connectedness. Opposite of individualist countries, collectivist cultures hold healthy relationships with others and maintaining the social norms regarding how one should be in various social situations in higher regard than receiving justice. Countries that follow this social pattern include China, Korea, Japan, and Latin America. Ho and Fang (2011) posited that the characteristics of the collectivist social pattern potentially influence the processes and conceptualizations of emotional forgiveness. Another difference between the social patterns is that European cultures typically resist suppression of their emotions; whereas, women of Asian cultures are most likely to suppress their negative emotions (Ho & Fang, 2011). This trend of resistance and suppression across cultures can also influence emotional forgiveness.

In contrast to individualist cultures, emotional forgiveness is perceived as an interpersonal construct in collectivist cultures (Ho & Fung, 2011). Emotional forgiveness in this culture relies heavily on the external use of language and thought to process and extend emotional forgiveness to the abuser. In Asian cultures, individuals pay more attention to recidivism and their relationship with the abuser rather than how they can control the abuser as done in American cultures. Because collectivist cultures put more

emphasis on positive interpersonal relationships, they are more likely to avoid confrontation and minimize expressions of conflict. A collectivist perceives his or her abuse as a threat to their social harmony, thus their motivations for emotional forgiveness are to restore the harmony in their community.

### **Theoretical Models of Family Relationship**

Two theories provide a basis for understanding the family dynamics involved when men emotionally forgive abusive parents. In the REACH forgiveness model, Worthington (2014) described the stages that occur between a victim and their abuser during emotional forgiveness. Murray Bowen's family system's theory discusses the dynamics within a family and how nuclear familial relationships affect multiple generations. Bowen's theory explains different relationship attachments such as enmeshed, disengaged, and child-parent relationship.

### **REACH Forgiveness Model**

Worthington creates five steps individuals can take towards emotional forgiveness. Worthington et al. (2014) explained why individuals first need to remember the pain and suffering another has inflicted upon oneself. The victim will be better equipped to show empathy toward the transgressor when the victim can try to understand the offender's viewpoint (Worthington et al., 2010). When the participant can recall a time when he or she caused pain and suffering towards another and then received forgiveness, he or she can be mentally and emotionally prepared to offer the same forgiveness. The participant accomplishes committing when the participant publicly forgives the transgressor (Greer et al., 2014). Last, the participant needs to hold on to his

or her choice to forgive instead of the pain once felt. Davis et al. (2015) reinforced Worthington's theory that after making a decision to forgive a transgression, an emotional forgiveness occurs that works to reframe how the individual perceives the transgressor and his or her offense. The reframe replaces negative emotions with positive ones such as empathy, love, and compassion.

Forgiveness interventions have not been adapted for families or children. Worthington, Jennings, and DiBlasio (2010) used a stress and coping conceptualization of emotional forgiveness to establish a framework for understanding emotional forgiveness in the family system. There have been several evidence-based interventions to promote forgiveness; however, few have targeted families and focus on emotional forgiveness instead of decisional forgiveness. This study aims to bridge that gap by focusing on emotional forgiveness in the parent-child relationship using Worthington's REACH model.

REACH forgiveness model has been an effective framework in understanding the phenomenon of forgiveness. Ho and Fang (2011) postulated that individualist cultures distinguish themselves from others yearning for personal benefits; however, collectivist cultures see themselves as a community desiring social harmony. The motivation of individualist cultures leads it to endorse emotional forgiveness; collectivist cultures may endorse decisional forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2014). The REACH model has continuously had a high efficacy rate in a wide range of populations. Wade et al. (in press) had efficacy in the model studying secular state university students, parents, and couples. The efficacy on the REACH forgiveness model has been empirically supported

by 22 randomized controlled trials (Worthington et al., 2014). The model has also been adapted to collectivist cultures and the Christian worldview.

### **Family Systems Theory**

Bowen's (2004) family systems theory contributes an essential element to the theoretical framework of the proposed study. The contribution of this model enables the research to explore emotional forgiveness as it exists in the context of the parent-child relationship.

Bowen's theory is based on the principle that individuals are best understood within the context of family, where responsibilities and expectations maintain patterns of behavior (Bowen, 2004). Behavior of individuals influence the behavior of other members in the family system. The interdependence of these roles may potentially further harmony or lead to dysfunction contingent upon the intensity of behavior of individuals in the family unit. The family systems theory stresses family context to an individual's wellbeing (Wright, 2009), and states that one's operating within the family system is influenced by his or her ability to differentiate from the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Reciprocally, family functioning affects differentiation of family members.

Differentiation refers to an ability to function both individually, and within the family system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The more differentiated individual has clear boundaries pertaining to situations and his or her responses; whereas, the less-differentiated individual tends to have blurred or enmeshed boundaries regarding the situation and personal responses. A mature individual has highly differentiated him or herself from the parental family. This is achieved in response to the highly differentiated

individual having clearly defined ego-boundaries and able to attain closeness with family members and others without forfeiting a sense of individuality.

Systemic approaches have been effectively used in various research scenarios. Outpatient drug detoxification applying a family systems approach is an example of a feasible option to inpatient detoxification (Bischof, Richmond, & Case, 2003). The authors documented their findings using a case study. Selection of appropriate participants for outpatient detoxification required medical screening. The requirements for the study participant included being unemployed, and residing at home with his mother. Hertlein and Killmer (2004) used Bowen's theory in treating the homeless who were experiencing mental illness or addiction. The Samaritan Counseling Center provided therapy for homeless participants for 6 years. A common theme among participants was poor differentiation of self. The therapists studied how the poor differentiation influenced the participants' aptitude to make practical decisions independently. The researchers concluded that homeless participants usually made decisions based on emotion or impulsivity, rather than intellectual processing. The therapists did both individual and family therapy with the homeless participants to address systemic, maladaptive patterns of functioning in the family system.

Family systems therapy was also used with an individual diagnosed with AIDS (Ackerman, 1989). Related issues were discussed, including the participant's sexual addiction, his family's acceptance, and his comfort level with his sexual orientation. The results of family systems therapy indicated the individual's relationship was strengthened, and he assumed more constructive lifestyle patterns.

### **Emotional Forgiveness and Religion**

Worthington et al. (2010) approached the concept of emotional forgiveness from a religious perspective. With love and emotional forgiveness understood as the cornerstone of Christianity, the authors focused on emotional forgiveness interventions. The interventions presented by the authors are directed to those holding a Christian worldview. Worthington et al. (2010) posited that adults have the capacity for a deeper understanding of emotional forgiveness than children. Children are taught to forgive, and as their reasoning ability matures they may claim they forgive as a way to avoid social disapproval. Children with nurturing authority figures modeling emotional forgiveness and rewarding acts of emotional forgiveness are more likely to foster an attitude of emotional, rather than decisional forgiveness.

Emotional forgiveness in dating relationships is a related area of attention. Rye and Pargament (2002) studied forgiveness and healing in romantic, college relationships. The study comprised of college women ( $N = 58$ ) who had been hurt in romantic relationships, and who claimed moderate religiosity in their Christian faith. The researchers used random assignment to create three groups, one control group and two intervention groups. One intervention group held the Christian worldview, and the other intervention group held a secular worldview. The Christian worldview group participated in activities each session comparable to the secular group with the addition of Biblical references. Forgiveness Strategies Surveys were given prior to the study, after the study, and six weeks after the study ended to follow-up. Compared to the control group, results

indicated both intervention groups made significant improvements on emotional forgiveness and existential measures (Rye & Pargament, 2002).

The results of these studies of emotional forgiveness suggest that emotional forgiveness of family relationships is achievable (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2010). However, emotional forgiveness has not been explicitly examined in the emotional forgiveness of families where men were abused by a parent during childhood. In this study, I address that gap in the literature in studying the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents.

### **Summary**

Emotional forgiveness has its place in cultures all around the world. Some are motivated to emotionally forgive by an injustice gap while others are motivated by the restoration of social harmony (Ho & Fang, 2011). Just as emotional forgiveness is influenced by cultural factors, as are the abuses individuals suffer.

The happiness and emotional and mental welfare of abuse victims often rest on the ability to sincerely emotionally forgive the abusive parent and ultimately reconcile the parent-child relationship (Brauns, 2008). The literature is lacking research relating to the meaning and experience of men who emotionally forgive parents following an abusive parent-child relationship. This study concentrated on a gap in the literature with regard to emotional forgiveness in the parent-child relationship, as experienced by the adult men who were abused by a parent. In my study, I examined the lived experience of men in effort to obtain understanding of the experience of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. The phenomenological approach allowed the opportunity for in-depth, rich exploration of

men's experiences as they are lived.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

My purpose in this study was to explore the lived experiences of adult males who have emotionally forgiven abusive parents. For the purpose of the study, emotional forgiveness means a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person by replacing negative feelings with positive thoughts and behaviors toward a transgressor, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated (Brauns, 2008; Davis et al., 2015). I studied the lived experiences of adult men who have emotionally forgiven an abusive parent to gain insight into emotional forgiveness under these circumstances.

This chapter includes the research question, research design, and the rationale for the design choice. I will describe my role as the researcher, which is specific to qualitative research. I detailed the methodology for the study along with a description of how objectivity, integrity, fidelity, and transferability were fostered as well as potential ethical issues.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question that guided this study is as follows: What are the lived experiences of those who emotionally forgive abusive parents?

The primary phenomenon of concentration is the experience of emotional forgiveness. Objectively, this is defined as an offended pardoning the offender from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person by replacing negative feelings with positive thoughts and behaviors toward an offender. However, my intent was to explore

this phenomenon through the eyes and experience of adult men who were abused at some point by their parents.

Moustakas (1994) used his phenomenological approach to obtain a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of emotional forgiveness when adult men had been abused by their parents. Moustakas (1994) has a holistic approach when exploring the phenomenon of interest, and considers the data of direct contact vital to comprehending human behavior (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, Moustakas acknowledged that research questions are frequently conceptualized from the researcher's personal interest and commitment. This allows the researcher to adopt a role of self-reflection in addition to the role of researcher as well as analyst into others' experiences (Patton, 2002). Using first-person interviews allowed the data to expose the authentic experience and the meaning of the phenomenon in question.

I pondered alternative qualitative approaches. I considered a narrative review due to its emphasis on individual's stories; however, it focuses less on meaning and experience. I also considered ethnography because of its examination of lived realities. Ethnographies emphasize understanding a specific culture and how it works but this study will not. I also contemplated a case study approach with its focus on exploration; however, I deemed it inappropriate due to this study not examining a specific event or a more restricted phenomenon. Consequently, phenomenological study and the exploration of the phenomenon of related experiences was the best suited approach for the research question.

### **Role of Researcher**

My role as the researcher was to select and interview participants and to gather, categorize, and analyze data. I had no former managerial, instructor, or authoritative role whatsoever over selected participants. As the researcher, I controlled personal biases by first acknowledging and then bracketing my own presumptions and concentrating exclusively on the participants' experiences. I served as a transcriber of the participants' lived experiences pertaining to the phenomenon of emotional forgiveness.

It is necessary to disclose that I have personal experience with emotionally forgiving an abusive parent. In my experience, emotional forgiveness of parent-child relationships has occurred for years and is ongoing. It is my experience as a child of an abusive parent that led me to consider that other lived experiences of adult children experiencing this phenomenon could offer valuable discernment. I do not have conclusive understanding of just how or why emotional forgiveness occurred; however, I deduced the following supporting factors, which I will bracket as potential presumptions in effort to concentrate on experiences of the study participants:

- Continued love shown toward my father, my abusive parent.
- Conscious effort to honor him.
- Psychotherapy for the myself, the adult child.
- A strong desire to follow God's Word.

I provided an informed consent form to guarantee participants' understanding of the proposed study and my experience pertaining to their participation, research purpose, and procedures. I reviewed with the participants in detail the potential risks and benefits

associated with their participation and apprise the participants that their participation is completely voluntary should they wish to remove themselves from the study at any time. I will protect the informed consent and participant confidentiality during and after the conclusion of the study.

## **Methodology**

### **Selection Logic**

**Population.** The target population was adult men previously abused by their parent. The accessible population, from which the sample will be drawn, consists of two sources. These included:

- Children's advocacy centers.
- Community mental health resources.

The mission of advocacy centers is preventing child abuse one child at a time. Patients may continue to receive services for mental health for trauma from abuse and neglect upon becoming adults and do not age out of services. The second source comes from a variety of churches, clinics, and agencies located in my hometown offering mental health services to its community members.

**Sampling strategy.** I used both criterion sampling and snowball sampling to solicit adult men to participant. Criterion sampling selects individuals who meet some specified criteria (Patton, 2002). Participants in the study were adult men who have been abused by a parent. I used snowball sampling by asking recruited participants whether they are aware of any other men who experienced the same phenomenon. For example, participants may know others from work, an organization, or church. Some participants

may be members of support groups with other abused adults, and this process had the potential of “snowballing.” Because of the vulnerability presented with this phenomenon, caution was taken in recruiting participants.

**Criteria for selection.** Participants in the study were adult men who had been abused by a parent. The research participants were biological, adopted, or step-children. The invitation (described in the next section) provided a clear statement regarding who was most suitable to participate.

**Sample size.** In phenomenological research, the sample size needs to be large enough to guarantee that phenomenon is thoroughly covered (Mason, 2010). An indication the sample size is sufficient is when all relevant aspects of the adult men’s lived experiences have been revealed. Guest et al. (2006) and Patton (2002) referred to this as saturation. Saturation is achieved when the themes in the data become repetitive and relevant new data are no longer being uncovered (Patton, 2002). In the beginning stages of data collection, all data require equal consideration; during the initial analysis phase, the degree of recurrence of a specific data point is inconsequential. Saturation occurs when rich, comprehensive depiction is achieved, as opposed to when a specified quantity of repetitions has occurred. Morse (2000) found it could take as few as six to 10 participants to reach saturation. The number of participants that represent saturation point is determined through adequate analysis during the research process. To ensure research quality, I continued the research process until obtaining saturation.

### **Procedures for Recruitment**

I contacted various counselors in the surrounding communities requesting permission to provide an invitation (Appendix A) to potential participants receiving their services. Interested individuals contacted me by phone or email. I reviewed via email or phone the criteria for participation, letter of informed consent, and I scheduled a time for the interview. I sent letters and e-mails to counselors in neighboring churches requesting their assistance with distributing invitations to potential participants for the study (Appendix A). As stated previously, potential participants contacted me via e-mail or by phone. I then reviewed criteria, letter of informed consent, and scheduled an interview when appropriate. I began retrieving data in the research study through 60- to 90-minute interview sessions once the signed informed consent is obtained. I made audio recordings for each session while I took field notes. At the conclusion of each interview, I debriefed participants. I gave participants thorough explanations of how the data would be stored and used. I requested each participant to member check his interview. At the completion of each interview, I sent a summary of each interview to the participants to authenticate the meaning of their lived experience was accurately represented. Last, I asked each participant at the conclusion of their interview whether there was anyone they knew who met the criteria for the study whom they would like to refer.

### **Instrumentation**

I used Moustakas's (1994) long interview protocol as a guide to create a semi structured interview to collect rich, thorough descriptions of participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of emotional forgiveness. The interview questions were

influenced by the research question and derived from peer-reviewed theoretical frameworks of Worthington et al. (2014) REACH forgiveness model and Hargrave and Sells (1997) interpersonal relationship resolution scale (IRRS). Hargrave and Sells (1997) IRRS is comprised of two scales: 22 forgiveness items and 22 pain items. Each scale has four subscales (Hargrave & Sells, 1997). The four subscales of forgiveness are insight, understanding, giving the opportunity for compensation, and overt act of forgiving. The four subscales of pain are shame, rage, control, and chaos. I used the two scales and eight subscales to create the interview guide. Participant confidentiality was protected using numerical coding during interviews and on all data field notes. A trial of the interview questions was conducted with a colleague who was subjected to abuse from a parent. The purpose of the trial was to ensure questions were comprehensible and to confirm estimated interview length (60 to 90 minutes) is accurate.

**Sufficiency of data collection instruments.** Content validity was established in two ways. The application of established Worthington et al.'s (2014) REACH forgiveness model and Hargrave and Sells (1997) provided a strong theoretical basis for developing the questions for the current study. Second, to increase the validity of the instrument, the interview guide was assessed by one methodological expert (B. Landry, personal communication [July 2, 2017]) and one content area expert (K. Palmer, personal communication [July 2, 2017]). Their remarks and recommendations were integrated into the questions.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To increase objectivity, I practiced epoché. I began this process by purposefully identifying and casting aside my preconceived notions regarding emotional forgiveness. For the purpose of this study, Moustakas's (1994) defined *epoché* as a process that methodically identifies, acknowledges, and casts away any preconceived opinions regarding emotional forgiveness. I bracketed the research question to safeguard its attention (Patton, 2002), and recorded every important account from participants that was applicable to research question, assigning equal value to each statement (horizontalization). The process of horizontalization required my unbiased receptiveness of participants' accounts, while equally valuing all of the participants' statements. I recorded the participant's important statements or quotes that revealed how the participant had experienced the phenomenon. In the next step, reduction and elimination, I removed irrelevant statements not pertaining to the topic including overlapping or repetitive statements. This left horizons, textural meanings of the experienced phenomenon. The remaining remarks were then categorized into themes, around which textural descriptions were assimilated. I then analyzed these remarks from the viewpoints of personal experience and the literature and interpreted underlying themes characteristic of the participants' shared or common experiences. In the last step of phenomenological reduction, I organized the consequent themes into a clear textural depiction of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). After phenomenological reduction was accomplished, I used imaginative variation to reveal potential meanings of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation required considering potentially divergent analyses to justify



the textural meanings and underlying themes in the phenomenon. To guarantee the data accurately supported a developing phenomenon, I reviewed the data for inconsistent cases that possibly contradicted the phenomenon.

The resulting themes were interpreted in the context of the central research question (Patton, 2002). I used Nvivo software (QSR International, 2013) for the qualitative data analysis. Nvivo software enables the management and analysis of qualitative data. The software tools aided in organizing and sorting of recorded data.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative methodologists have discovered a variety of strategies to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness is the key concept for quality quantitative research. Guba (1981) defines the concept of trustworthiness as having four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

In phenomenological research, credibility is essential to trustworthiness. Measures were taken to ensure credibility and confirm findings are an accurate representation of the phenomenon by implementing the following strategies (Shenton, 2004). I wrote interview questions grounded in peer-reviewed theoretical frameworks, literature, and input from content area and methodological experts. This established face and content validity to the instrument. I familiarized myself with the culture of abused adults through personal, professional, and academic experience, and was able to reword questions and reassess

previously addressed data to guarantee accuracy and inclusive analysis of the phenomenon.

I requested participants to partake in a member checking process to allow them an opportunity to assess and authenticate the results and confirm that their experiences have been accurately captured (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Participant authentication that their experiences have been accurately reflected enhanced the credibility of the data.

### **Transferability**

Transferability means the extent of which data results relate to alternative situations, and require that readers are capable of connecting and interpreting results as significant and pertinent to them (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). Detailed contextual description, in addition to a variety of participants, enhanced transferability. The explicit accounts permitted the reader to relate to the authenticity of experience, and foster transferability of the results. (Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

I resolved the issue of dependability through a thorough, rich, detailed report of the research methods that can aid as a comprehensive account of the research process (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). An exhaustive explanation permitted an independent review by the doctoral committee as well as afford the reader complete understanding of the research process and the potential for future study replication. The research design plan and execution were detailed for the purpose of dependability. In addition, a reflective journal was kept recording self-evaluation.

**Confirmability**

Similar to dependability, confirmability was used to achieve objectivity (Shenton, 2004). To meet this criterion, I provided a comprehensive account of the research design plan so that results can be validated and potentially replicated. I meticulously recorded how the data is collected, analyzed, and rechecked throughout the duration of the study (Patton, 2002). In addition, I kept a reflective journal to document the research process and considerations pertaining to research decisions.

**Ethical Procedures**

Clinical research is overseen and regulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Human Research Protections through Institutional Review Boards (DHHS, 2013). The Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are assigned to protect all research participants' rights, especially potentially vulnerable populations such as children, abuse victims, and the elderly. This study included vulnerable populations due to exploring the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents and followed the guidelines provided by federal regulations and the IRB.

All study participants were given the specifics of the research both verbally and in writing. Signing the Informed Consent document will certify the participants understand the processes, risks, and benefits pertaining to their participation. A statement regarding the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time will be included in the signed informed consent.

I ensured participant confidentiality using the following protocols. Participants were assigned pseudonyms which will be used in the storage of the data and in the

reporting of results. I protected all print records and documents behind a minimum of two secure locks, per Texas Department of State Health Services regulations. All electronic files were password protected. The documents will be destroyed in 5 years after the study's completion.

### **Summary**

This is a phenomenological study of adult men's experiences of emotionally forgiving their abusive parents. Phenomenological research is the way by which lived experiences of individuals can be learned and understood. The phenomenological research process included sending letters and e-mails to colleagues asking their aid distributing invitations to potential study participants. I reviewed the criteria and Informed Consent Letter, set up interview sessions with respondents, and afterward facilitated and audio recorded the 60- to 90-minute interview sessions. Lastly, I summarized the sessions and sent drafts to each participant asking for verification of accuracy. It was desired that the results of this study will be an asset in providing essential information to therapists, family members, and educators working with adult men who were abused by a parent.

## Chapter 4: Results

My purpose in this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents. For the purpose of the study, emotional forgiveness was defined as a commitment by the offended to pardon the repentant from all moral liability and to be reconciled to that person by replacing negative feelings with positive thoughts and behaviors toward a transgressor, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated (Brauns, 2008; Davis et al., 2015). I used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of men who emotionally forgive abusive parents to gain insight into family reconciliation under these circumstances. Participants in this study were seven men who were abused by their parent during their childhood. Using a semistructured interview guide I designed to encourage open and free discussion of their experiences regarding the phenomena of emotional forgiveness, the study answered the following research question:

1. What are the lived experiences of those who emotionally forgive abusive parents?

In Chapter 4, I outline recruitment, data collection process, data analysis, verification procedures, and presents findings of the study. Topical headings are setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

### **Setting**

I initiated face-to-face interviews in a private room at the public library in Texas. When face to face interviews were not convenient for the participant, I conducted a phone interview. At an agreed upon time set at the initial contact, I either met at the public library where a private room was reserved or called the telephone number provided by the participants residing in the Texas area and beyond. Participants denied any unusual personal conditions or professional circumstances that might have influenced their experiences at the time of the interview.

### **Demographics**

Seven participants residing in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area were interviewed. Table 1 presents the demographics. Participants listed their ages in the following age ranges: Younger than 30 years, 30 to 39 years old, 40 to 49 years old, 50 to 64 years old, and older than 64 years. Their responses indicated that the ages of participants ranged from younger than 30 years of age to older than 64 years. All but one of the participants were biologically related to the abusive parent referred to in the study. One participant was the stepson of the abusive parent.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Coded name	Age bracket (years)	Abusive parent
Jon	Younger than 30	Father
Alex	30-39	Father
Richard	50-64	Stepfather
Claus	50-64	Mother
Howard	50-64	Father
Twain	50-64	Father
Reese	40-49	Mother

### **Data Collection**

I attempted recruitment of study participants through the following avenues. I contacted supervisors from various programs, agencies, and churches within my community requesting permission to provide an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A) to potential participants who either receive services or employment through them. When granted permission, I posted an invitation to participate at various programs, agencies, and neighboring churches. I sent e-mails to professional colleagues and associates asking them if they would assist in forwarding an Invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). I attempted snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to share my contact information with others they might know experiencing the same phenomenon. Only one participant was recruited using this method. Interested individuals contacted me through my student email. I set up a time to review the criteria and informed consent letter and scheduled a time for the interview. The participants met the criteria of being adult men older than 18 years and were fluent in English. Participants were from participating in the research study if in crisis. Crisis was identified as current hospitalization. There were no potential participants in crisis and therefore excluded from the study.

Seven adult men participated in 60- to 90-minute semistructured interviews via telephone calls from the privacy of my own home in effort to protect participants confidentiality. I recorded the interview sessions using digital audio voice recorder and I saved the recordings on my password protected computer. I took notes both during the interviews, and when reading the transcripts later. My notes contained any personal or



emotional reactions, perceptions, and reflections pertaining to the participants' stories as I empathized from my own experience of having emotionally forgiven an abusive parent. Interviews were transcribed by myself and my assistant. The interview transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo on my password-protected computer. All identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms including numerical coding were substituted for the participants' names. The pseudonyms were changed an additional time when the study was summarized into this document.

### **Data Analysis**

This phenomenological study followed Moustakas's (1994) processes with phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Moustakas's procedures provided an opportunity for me to obtain meaning from the 7 semistructured interviews by labeling and classifying into categories significant statements that were relevant to emotional forgiveness of their abusive parent. The procedure concluded in themes grouped by likeness and were compiled in categorical explanations.

To maximize objectivity and ensure liberty from my preconceived assumptions, I utilized Moustakas's (1994) epoché process. As an adult child who emotionally forgave an abusive parent, I intentionally identified and listed any personal opinions and biased ideas about emotionally forgiving an abusive parent. Prior to collecting data, I set aside my following presumptions:

- Continued honor and love demonstrated toward the abusive parent is essential for emotional forgiveness.

- Psychotherapy for the adult child contributes to the adult child's ability to emotionally forgive.
- Psychotherapy for the abusive parent contributes to the adult child's ability to emotionally forgive.
- Receiving family therapy from a therapist can be helpful in the emotional forgiveness process.

In the first step of data analysis, I transcribed each of the audio-recorded interviews into typed documents. As I transcribed the audio material into Word documents, I stopped the recordings often and replayed to guarantee precision in transcribing the participants' experiences. I read and reread each individual story and familiarized myself with the totality of the participants' experiences. At the completion of transcribing the interviews, I emailed interview summaries to each of the participants with requests that they verify that I had accurately captured their experience (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004).

I began the data analysis process by addressing the research question. I utilized hand-coding for the transcribed interviews. I used different colored pens and highlighters to identify participants' statements that pertained to the experience of emotional forgiveness. The hand-coding process increased my familiarity with the participants' experiences. To manage and facilitate the data analysis, typed interview documents, with participants identified by a number, were uploaded into Nvivo software (QSR International, 2013). I bracketed the research question to safeguard its attention (Patton, 2002). Following the process of horizontalization, every significant quote or statement

pertaining to the research question representative of how the participants experienced the phenomenon was listed and regarded equally. Repetitive statements were deleted. Remaining statements, identified as relating to emotional forgiveness were labeled. Categories were designed to organize related textural content under a Nvivo node created for this purpose.

I studied my log for any differences in data analysis or variations in my assumptions as I occupied myself with the data. As I interviewed the participants, I found parallels between their experiences and my own experiences as a child of an abusive parent, and I made note of any of my abreactions in my field notes log. I also recognized the participants' unique experiences, commitment, determination, and perseverance in emotionally forgiving their abusive parent. A few times I wondered if a participant had given up hope for emotional forgiveness to occur. I set my concern aside and actively listened to the full participants' experience.

A list of 38 codes resulted, and these are provided in Appendix B. I grouped codes having similar elements together forming 18 categories. In the last step of the phenomenological reduction process, I grouped categories having similar features together into 8 themes and arranged the resulting themes into a clear textural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the theme cognitive distortions is comprised of the codes I deserved it, I am a bad person, I am unlovable, I should have known better, I am stupid (not smart enough), I am worthless, I am not good enough, and I should have done something. I utilized imaginative variation to reveal possible meanings of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this, I examined

different potential interpretations to explain the textural meanings, and explored underlying themes that might best reveal a deeper understanding of emotional forgiveness. After systematically grouping similar codes, eight themes persisted as combined illustrations of the 38 codes (Table 2).

Table 2

*Themes and Categories Identified in Phenomenological Reduction*

Themes				
Coping	Evolution of emotions	Cognitive distortions	Substance abuse	Making meaning of the abuse
Dissociation	Relief	I deserve it	Alcohol	Consequences
Denial	Hatred	I am a bad person	Prescription pills	Responsibility
Avoidance	Confusion	I am unlovable		Self-preservation
Substance use	Shaming	I should have known better		
Eating disorder	Fear	I am stupid		
	Guilty	I am worthless		
	Lonely	I am not good enough		
	Anxious	I should have done something		
	Exhausted			
	Worthless			
	Pride			
	Justified			
	Anger			

*(table continues)*

Effects of emotional abuse	Christ forgave me	God's grace
More long-term	Empathizing with abuser	Cognitive reframes
Harder to overcome	Obligation	Sanctification
Most damaging		

### Discussion of Themes

**Coping.** The participants described their experiences of managing and continuing to function while deciding how to respond to the abuse and arrive in a place where emotional forgiveness could be extended to the parent. The participants described both healthy and unhealthy ways they were able to handle the abusive relationship such as limiting time spent interacting with the abusive parent, numbing the pain by self-medicating, escaping into their own mind, as well as others. Some of the participants reported experiencing physical abuse; however, all reported experiences of emotional abuse. Participants shared how they chose to cope with the abuse which tended to evolve from unhealthy means to coping skills that were more glorifying to God and gave the participant a greater sense of peace.

**Dissociation.** Related to the theme of coping is dissociation. Dissociation is when an individual disconnects and lacks continuity between thoughts, memories, actions, surroundings, and identity. This is often done as an escape from the trauma being suffered and is a natural defense mechanism all people are capable of in varying degrees (Schimmenti, 2017). Some participants shared how they were physically present during the abuse of their parent but would go someplace else in their mind to help them feel safe.

- There was a lot of emotional abuse too that I still...I learned coping skills or at least survival mechanisms that helped me. For instance, if he did something that really overjoyed me like give me a gift or something, he'd find a way to take it away later to crush me. Or if he did something to crush me and he saw that, he'd do it continually. I mean when my present wife and I got married it was something that I was aware of but at that point I told her I may be overjoyed on the inside but... She can read me now but I don't show outward emotion at all. Or rarely. No matter how I feel because that was a coping mechanism, something that I decided to do. I viewed it as a game growing up and I just decided to not play the game no matter what he said. I just offered no reaction, positive or negative, no matter what it did to me on the inside. (Richard)
- I was able to kind of separate myself. I was there physically but I would go somewhere else in my mind to try to get through. (Richard)
- Of course, he got no reaction from me because I had been doing that for years. (Richard)

***Avoidance.*** Another way participants coped with the abuse was to avoid their abuser. Often times with abuse there is a control deficit (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Participants regularly expressed feeling that they had limited control in their lives while the abuse was going on and one of the few things they could do was to try to avoid their abuser as much as possible. Avoidance was manifested in different ways among the participants. Some avoided their abuser physically while others avoided having to process

what was happening to them. Others avoided their feelings toward the abuser as well as conflicts with the abuser.

- My experience with her as an adult would be just those few months before she died. Because I pretty much got my life out of the house. Between college and everything else I just stayed away. (Claus)
- I just totally avoided her. I mean she never went needing something and I wouldn't help her. If she needed something, I would help her. I just wouldn't go over there and hang out. I would go over there, do what I needed to do and leave. (Claus)
- When I got away I could be more objectively and get out of the emotional side. But when you're in the situation... Its why doctors don't treat themselves. (Claus)
- I just wanted to get away from it. That's why I moved out. And I think when I moved out that is when the forgiveness started because it wasn't going to happen while I was still there. Because as soon as you turned around something else was going to happen. (Claus)
- I do have few more people that I was disappointed about in my life and one of them was a coworker I started to work with when I was 18. He was so managed by his wife that it screwed up the relationship that we had. And it was an authentic partnership. He was threatening me and I was thinking how could people turn out to be so different in their behavior to someone they loved, so easily. That guy he died in a car accident and I



didn't go his funeral. And another partner working with us asked why I didn't go. I got him in my memory that way. I respected him, I loved him, I wanted to have him as a friend and then he disappeared and left my world. And then the same person with the same face was threatening me and my family. I don't want to go to the funeral of that man because that man who unfortunately died has nothing to do with the man who remains in my memory. Not my imagination, but in my memories. And that's the same way with dad. I do love him in my own way now and I'm thankful to him for those things. But that's what you do. When someone betrays you, you put the image of them before they've done it, and you love that image. But it's two different men that you have to deal with. The one that is in your memory is the one who was honest. (Alex)

- I didn't care if she was alive. I didn't care if she was dead. I didn't care if she was sick, healthy, drunk, sober, I just didn't care. I didn't care. I didn't care about your story, about your cancer, I just didn't care how you are doing. I didn't say that but that is what was going on in my heart. (Reese)
- I'm going to be in high school and I'll graduate and then I am moving as far away as I can get. Which meant back to Mount Sterling. But I am going to get as far away from this woman as I can and I am never going to talk to her again. (Reese)
- I was happy to get away from my mother for the weekend. (Reese)

- And I graduated and ended up moving further away than anticipated to the north shore of Boston to go to Gordon College and that was the first time my mom softened. (Reese)
- When I didn't have to work for him anymore, that took a huge pressure off. I didn't have to see him every day during the week and see his episodes or him go off. It was almost like a switch turned on and I don't know what it was but is like a switch turned on after I stopped working for him and all that pressure and I didn't have to worry about what he was thinking and doing, I think that was the biggest factor probably. (Howard)
- A lot of times, dad just blew it off and it was something he wouldn't talk about. We didn't air out our grievances or anything else. (Howard)
- It was just something that I couldn't do anymore. Sometimes I wouldn't want to deal with it but it would be something I'd do for my mom or whomever is dealing with the situation or conflict with my father. (Howard)
- It's weird though your mind when you're not a believer is corrupt on all levels and you are selfish and you are not able to think about things in the past that you've already wiped under the rug. (Howard)
- Well, I mean when I wasn't a Christian I just didn't want to think about it. Just push it under the rug and not dwell on it because if you do you have to go back and talk about it. (Howard)

- I laugh too much. When something gets too stressful, I'll laugh or tell jokes to keep me that "Even Stephen". It is something that I have learned is a defense mechanism. (Twain)
- So that was kind of what life was like until I was 18 and joined the Navy to escape and at that point he did say one thing to me that really helped me and that was him saying, "you'll be back" and he chuckled..."you'll need my help" and he chuckled...I made up my mind right then that I would never be back and that I would never ask for help so that was probably the best thing he ever said to me. (Richard)
- In the home that I grew up in it was avoidance. We did not want his attention on us because it was usually not pleasant so there was a lot of fear in the home growing up. So that was my typical interaction, I just tried to avoid him as much as possible. (Richard)
- I might go out with him that first time but then it was back to avoiding him. I'd go out with friends or just avoid him the rest of the time I was on leave and see him again on my way back to the airport to go back to whatever base I was stationed at. There was not a whole lot of...I figured I'm a grown man and did not want to expose myself to it. (Richard)
- Back in the 60's and in the Deep South I think I was in the 3rd grade and brought a C home on my report card. He wacked me around pretty good. My right eye was swollen shut and my lip was really swollen. The next morning it was time to go to school and I begged my mom, I was

embarrassed, I didn't want to go but she made me go. In hind sight I think she was thinking if she made me go one of the teachers would take some sort of action, call the authorities, because she was too scared to do it and I was too young. But Deep South in the 60's, I think it was viewed as a family matter and people just did not get involved. I remember the teacher asking me what happened. I gave her some 3rd grader's excuse and she said ok and that was the end of that. I had been beaten with the buckle end of the belt a few times, lots of bruises and stuff like that. (Richard)

- There was pain with that and also frustration because she would not do anything about it. Mainly, leaving. She just stayed in there and continued to endure it. (Richard)
- As an adult I had geographic avoidance rather than having to be in my own little shell in the house. I had geographically separated myself from him. (Richard)

**Commitment.** Another way participants expressed coping with the abuse was making commitments they could hold on to. All of the participants held on to their commitment to emotionally forgive their abusive parent; however, other commitments were made along the way such as committing to break the cycle of abuse.

- I have realized that my relationship with him has to be my relationship with him. And this is what I feel like I am being called to do and this is where I have gotten to with my walk with Christ, my beliefs in him, and what my wife and I think is best for our family. (Jon)

- She [wife] is very encouraging for us to continue to commit to have a relationship with him. Not just me but our family. She has definitely been the biggest component in that and support in that. (Jon)
- When I uncovered all this crap about this storage unit and him mailing a check. I was putting in stone into my mind. Doing it on purpose, keep playing that game instead of avoiding it. (Alex)
- I knew one thing when I was about 15... well, no, 8 when she was in there screaming about the curtains, that's when I said I will never drink and never smoke and when I get out of here I will never be around those who do. And I have kept to that. (Claus)
- I just decided it was time. I wanted this stuff over with. It happened and we both didn't mean for stuff to happen so that is all I can say about it. (Richard)
- There's just no way. I'm not going to do it. Nobody wakes up and goes, "This year, I am going to become an alcoholic..." That's not what anyone aspires to be. It happens slowly. And I don't want any part of it. (Claus)
- Because it was so ensconced in my memory because of what I went through. I had no temptation. You know after you've been burned really bad, you don't want to play with fire. And I have been burned so bad, I didn't want any part of it. I didn't want to date people who did. It was just something I am not going to do. Like anything else that is unhealthy. I am

just not going to do it. I lost a lot of friends or I thought they were friends because I wasn't very open minded but I didn't care. (Claus)

- I haven't struggled [with the commitment]. It is just kind of my personality. It's my cop brain. I know that sounds silly but it is the truth. If you commit to something than just do it. I just think like that. If I commit to something than I am going to do it. It not like well, I'll do this if it doesn't get bad or doesn't get cloudy...No, if I say I'm going to do it, than I am going to do it. It doesn't help anything to go back. It is worse. I don't want to do that. I've had enough bad; I want to focus on the good. There is plenty of bad in life without looking for more. (Claus)
- I was trying to do the best I could do to walk with the Lord and live my Christian life for a year hating my mother. I was loving Jesus and hating my mom and didn't sense any discord between those two things. (Reese)
- It took me a year to finally be able to say alright, whatever it means to forgive my mom, that's what I am going to do. I talk about this to friends, I had people praying for me and it took a year-ish for me to say, "I'm going to do this thing..." (Reese)
- Our relationship had begun to change before I became a Christian but after I became a Christian it cemented it. (Howard)
- When I forgave him that was it. It was forgotten by me. I still remember the things that happened but I am not mad about it like I used to be or

upset about it. It happened and now it's over and now he is gone which I miss him. (Twain)

- When it [forgiveness] was over it was over. (Twain)
- It is not a struggle to hang on to it now. Even now when I am talking to you, I am not angry with him. The pain may come back, but I am not angry. I don't have... it is not a struggle anymore. For me it is something that I have dealt with and it is over and done with. I don't need to relive it. I can't recall a time since I have forgiven him that I have been angry with him. You know he's dead, what is the point in being angry with him. It is not a struggle. One thing out of the process I've learned is how to forgive others. And like I said, it is realizing anytime I feel angry about something a red flag goes up inside me and I start asking myself sarcastically "How are you really feeling? You are not really angry?? And then I will start self-analyzing and figure out the real emotion behind it. I'll use that same process over and over again. (Richard)

**Evolution of emotions.** A second theme that surfaced in the participants' experience was the plethora of emotions experienced during different stages of emotional forgiveness. A lot of the emotions were originally misidentified by the participants as anger or hatred. During the course of their journey to emotional forgiveness, participants relabeled these misidentified emotions as hurt. Getting beyond the superficial emotion to identify what was truly going on in the participants' heart was something the participants shared.

**Confusion.** One expression of the overwhelming emotions felt during this journey was being confused by the abuser’s behavior. Participants told of parents who would have very different personalities. One personality would be kind and loving and the other would be cruel and violent. Participants shared that making sense of this as a child was a challenge.

- It was very confusing. I was wondering what had I done to make her do this...What had I done to deserve this...? (Claus)
- When you’re younger you kind of know you didn’t but you still wonder, “What had I done to cause this?” “Maybe she is doing this because she is unhappy with the way we turned out?” (Claus)
- Yeah, and like I said mama took up for him and tried to blame it on both of us. (Twain)
- So, we went to the store one day and the checker asked her, “Mildred, what happened to your foot?” and she said, “Oh, Bubba...” Bubba was my nickname... “Bubba stepped on it and broke it...” She did want to tell him she was roaring drunk and broke it herself. (Claus)
- I remember her having another one of her drunken screamers and she asked “Whose side are you on?” And I remember wondering what does she mean, “Whose side am I on”? In other words, was I on my father’s side and wanted to go to his room... I mean I had my own room but it was like are you on my side or his side. I did not understand that and she just kept berating me over that. You always had to pick sides, and I never



knew what that was about. It was never explained and I wanted to ask,  
 “What do you mean?” (Clause)

- Well, I caught the brunt. I really did. For the four of us boys, I caught the brunt of it. Why, I will never know. Probably, I think I wasn’t the other boys. My brothers were pretty good in school. I was not. I was a chubby fat little boy. That might have bugged him. I have no idea. I have no idea why it fell on me. (Twain)

***Hatred.*** It was common for participants to speak of their hatred toward their abuser. It gave them something to hold on to and make their own. Some of the participants told of hatred going both ways between the abuser and the abused. Others just spoke of their hatred that they struggled to let go of during their journey of emotional forgiveness.

- I experienced as I read this something that I had never experienced before and haven’t experienced since. And what I experienced for the first and last time as I completed verse 35 was a real sense of anger at god believing that He had taken something from me. Believing as I read this chunk of text that Jesus was taking something that belong to me and I was very unhappy with Him about it. The thing I believed Jesus to be taking from me was the hatred that I felt for my mother. (Reese)
- I relished the afternoons when she wasn’t home because I hated her, couldn’t stand her. I don’t mean that like some sophomore in high school who might say in a random situation, “ugh I just hate my mom and

dad...oh I just can't stand her". I didn't mean that. I had settled anger in my heart towards my mom and was counting down. (Reese)

- I hated her. Really hated her. And the reason I hated her was because my mom was an awful woman. Probably in the top 3 most horrific, most terrible people I have ever known in my life. There is a certain logic to my hatred for my mother as I lay there as a sophomore in high school. My mom was a drunk for about 13-15 years. Just swallowed bottles and bottles of vodka. She was unfaithful to my father and was living in sort of open unfaithfulness where everybody kind of knew what was going on. She made life really hard on my dad. (Reese)
- I hated Louisville. I hated being with my mom. (Reese)
- I had no concept for what was happening in my life and oh, I hated her. I hated her. Goodness gracious I hated this woman. I plotted ways I could get back to my dad but there was nothing I could do. I worked every angle I could. Mom started hating me now. (Reese)
- My hatred for my mother is mine. Don't you deserve to hate a woman like this. I mean hasn't she earned it the old-fashioned way. I mean abuse, horror, and terror... I remember laying on my bed this day and the things that I hated her for the most didn't have to do with the drinking, abuse, and foster care and all that, the stuff I thought about the most was the way she treated my dad. That is what I hated her for more than anything. How

am I supposed to forgive that? I have the Holy Spirit working in me. I knew I wasn't supposed to but I was hacked off about it. (Reese)

- I hated her and she hated me. She hated me back now. She knows I don't like her. She knows I am hating on her. (Reese)

**Anger.** Another emotion that was common among the participants was their anger. Each participant had different reasons and targets for their anger that made their experiences unique. Some were able to see anger as a secondary emotion that is used to indicate something deeper is happening.

- When I first realized how angry, and I am using the term angry because that is how it came up then in school and journaling and having nightmares. He was the source of all the nightmares. I would wake up in the middle of the night and journal. That was the hardest time. Just trying to figure out what was going on and asking myself why because I did not think about him very much so I'd ask why he is the focus of this and all these things were flooding back and even though I wasn't saved at the time, God could have very well been dealing with me about that then. So, the initial steps and me trying to sort through everything. (Richard)
- as an addictions counselor a lot of people are angry with their parents and their parents could be dead 20 years and I realized me carrying that anger, I mean he was dead, the only person it is going to hurt carrying it around was me and maybe the people around me. (Richard)

- One of the things that helped me because I told you how angry I was, I came to the realization one day and I believe this is true for everyone but especially for me...what I realized was a lot of time I would... anger is kind of a defensive, protective emotion but it is manifested in an anger kind of way. (Richard)
- It was at that point I realized how angry I was. I didn't know it until then. I came to realization at that time that I was really angry. (Richard)
- I have anger problems somewhat. Nothing like my dad's but sometimes I'll say things that I shouldn't say and the biggest challenge is when your grown kids don't do the things that they were taught, it is very hard to not lash out on them. (Howard)
- remember that evening we sat in the cabin and I started unloading on him because I was really angry. How could you leave us, you had two kids, I am named after you, I just went down the list. I told him how bad we had it and he broke. (Richard)
- So instead of turning to alcohol she tried to suffocate her anger with food. (Richard)

**Hurt.** Participants shared how they were able to see a lot of their anger was really a manifestation of being hurt by their abuser. This was an interesting revelation among the participants because it revealed a freedom to acknowledge their true emotions without diminishing their manhood.

- That was probably the biggest realization that helped me. I wasn't really angry. I don't have a reason to go around all ticked off. I am hurt and hurt looks different than anger. (Richard)
- What I realized with myself is all that anger was not really anger. It was pain. Once I was able to realize that I just dealt with the pain. The anger was not really an issue anymore. The anger just went away. So all those times I was saying I was angry, it was really pain that was manifesting itself as anger. I wasn't really angry, I was hurt. (Richard)
- Once I figured out that I was not really angry but hurt, that was the beginning for me to actually lay things aside. (Richard)
- There was pain with that and also frustration because she would not do anything about it. (Richard)
- It hurts the person who was wronged more than the person who did it. They really may care... but they don't get hurt as bad as the person they hurt. (Claus)

**Fear.** Participants commonly shared how they were afraid of the abusive parent. Some feared the unexpected while others feared for their lives. Not knowing what was going to happen next was a strong source of anxiety in the participants' lives while undergoing the abuse.

- You don't remember a lot from when you are three but I can remember flashes from that night. I can remember my mom screaming and my dad on his knees crying and my older brothers around them and I remember

being scared when he left. I remember a flash from my dad's pickup truck driving down the road and I know all those memories go together because I have talked about it with my dad. So, I am pretty confident all those memories go together and I remember feeling scared. (Reese)

- I remember being scared of my mom and feeling alone. (Reese)
- And I remember thinking she is going to find our tracks, she is going to find us here and we are going to get shot and then we are going to hell. And I would pray God please don't send me to Hell. I don't want to go to Hell. And that was kind of life until I was about 10. (Reese)
- I remember I was about 8 years old and her and my father were in an argument because like I said they had money and she had everything she wanted but they got into an argument over curtains. She wanted nicer curtains. Something stupid. I remember she was screaming, yelling, "get out of here" and all that stuff. And I remember running to the front door and thinking I just wanted to run away and I couldn't. It was dark. But I wanted to just run. (Claus)
- Granny said, I can remember this exactly. She said, "you boys aren't living, you are just surviving and I just hope that God doesn't sent you to Hell". And that was it. There was no Jesus. No Gospel. Just, "I hope you don't go to Hell". I remember thinking, "you know...I hope that too". That comment tormented me for years. I was about 7 or 8 when that happened. And it tormented me. I was able to fit that into whatever

Biblical filing system I had in my head and I just remember being tormented as a little boy about not wanting to go to Hell and wondering how Hell could be worse than this. I can remember lying in bed at night and playing mind games with myself trying to think about forever and trying to fit forever in my head. I would always try to come up with an ending for it. I'd be like no forever is longer than that and thought that was how long I'd be in Hell. (Reese)

- Because like I said, he threatened, I don't really recall exactly what was said, that triggered me to leave without saying goodbye to anyone.

Because I felt like, I cannot trust that if I were to tell anyone, to Sally, everything that came into my mind back then, you just wouldn't believe it. And uh, I packed my stuff and I left the house in two days, it was just like that. So spontaneous. I didn't have money. I called the guy and said hey, you got to get us the money, and I'll pay you back when I get back. Pull the money from the beer store, he was still working back then. He said, what's going on. I said don't ask, send me the money, just buy the tickets. And we bought the tickets and in two days we were packed and I think I even had rent paid for the next month. I told the landlord I left the house, it was all clean and so on, but we'd be out in two days. And that was out of that conversation when he started to play the situation when Nicholas got a call from the embassy asking him questions, like what took you so long, why did you stay in the U.S. for so long. These calls are so rare, they have

to be initiated by someone. So, my guess back then was that he [dad] called the embassy or something and told them something, whatever it was. He [dad] said oh well, I'm sorry, I was just angry and so on. And then, he [dad] was pushing me to be illegal staying in the U.S. I'm so glad I didn't screw it up and I got back on time. I mean I could use the visa, so I can apply again. I'm working on it. I thought, if it went south in that way. And he said something someone calling Sue... I remember how I caught him... He said that someone from the embassy and I didn't tell him that Nicholas received a call. He told me right away that someone called Sue on her cell phone asking questions about Nicholas. And I knew at the time that Nicholas got the call. But he left one thing out. Sue was never a part of Nicholas's paperwork as a point of contact in the U.S. He was. So, they wouldn't call her, they would call him. I said are you confident they called Sue. He said, yeah I'm confident. I guess Sue was protecting him and she confirmed it. I said, well that's really strange that we received a call and Nicholas just talked to the embassy a few days ago. He's like well yeah, I guess maybe they're just wondering what's going on. And I said, well I could be next. And he said, well yeah, we should do something. And that really started to push me toward thinking that I should be getting out before it's not too late. My words against his words, he's the U.S. citizen. Back then I was pretty confident that he was with the government, probably. It would just ruin me. I mean I'll be on a black list or something



and I don't want that. So, when he was threatening by calling the police and so on and so on. That's when I got back at the end of 2014. (Alex)

- I do believe there was a lot of control things going on. Maybe he had a bad day at work and felt he didn't have any control. Well, there was a group of people that he was in very strict control over and that was us. You know it was not something that I ever talked with him about, it is just what I imagine. For me things seemed to come out of the blue, out of nowhere.

(Richard)

- I remember she was screaming, yelling, "get out of here" and all that stuff. And I remember running to the front door and thinking I just wanted to run away and I couldn't. It was dark. But I wanted to just run. (Claus)

***Guilted.*** Participants felt that the abusive parent used them as scape goats. This was manifested in a variety of ways; however, the parents always put the guilt and blame on the participant.

- She would guilt us. She'd still do the guilt thing, "Well, you do this for me or you're not a good son or daughter..." (Claus)
- And I went home to my parent's house to my mother and asked her where's daddy and she said he went for a walk. She was all bombed and everything. And I told her well he's dead. Because they had an argument and he went for a walk. She started screaming, "It's your fault" and this crazy stuff and that was the last time. (Claus)

- She'd guilt you. She'd say, "Well, I won't be here..." She'd ask you to do something, like she needed to go somewhere. See, we had a driver or a maid. She didn't even drive. She didn't have to. So, she would say I need to go to the store. I'd say, "Well, mother I have a class but I can go after 2." She'd say that won't work for me. She'd say, "Well, I won't be here one day and that's ok". So, she'd guilt you. I'd either have to not go to this class or not take her to the store. I wouldn't fall for it. I'd tell her, "I'm going to this class. I'm available at 3 or after..." After a while she figured it wouldn't work and she stopped doing that. And she quit the guiltning because she knew I wouldn't play that game. The more you fell for it the more she'd do it. (Claus)
- I just remember my mom screaming and yelling and cussing at me one time in the kitchen just cussing me and cussing Jesus Christ and accusing me for being responsible if the family fell apart and it was bad. (Reese)

**Empathy.** All of the participants discussed how empathizing with their abuser helped them to emotionally forgive them and hold to that commitment of forgiveness. Some participants even saw some of the less desirable traits of their abuser in themselves once they entered adulthood. Experiencing first hand some of the challenges their abusive parents faced helped shift their perspective.

- I feel like two things really led to "Ah-ha" moments... here is someone who may not have the kind of relationship I have with my Lord and Savior and may not have that kind of lifestyle I had growing up with a really

good father figure, parental figure, grandparents, and a really strong Christian mother who pushed me into that way. I feel like with those two dominos focusing on those pieces I have been able to really release my heart and open up to him and do these things with him now that I would have never been able to do as a child or even in college until my heart could have honest, real conversations instead of just the facade that was there for so long. And I personally believe that we can have these conversations as much as you want but if change is going to happen, it is going to have to come through Christ. It first is going to have to come with him opening his eyes with what his life is before I can do anything past that. I can pray for him, which I have done my entire life... even probably stronger now that I have my own kid and have my relationship with that. But I feel that that anger and animosity all that kind of stuff got released and forgiveness started creeping in when I started realizing what kind of lifestyle and scenarios had to have taken place to put him where he is today. (Jon)

- I saw a lot of people who went through similar stuff and heard their stories of why they did some of this stuff and started to see she really was sick. It wasn't something that she intended to do out of being mean. It was something she did out of what she fell into. She was lured in. Whatever reason there was and she couldn't get out. (Claus)

- As a police officer, I had a lot of friends who had the same problem because they didn't know how to deal with it. I mean, we would see horrible things. They would end up in a similar situation. Most of them not as bad some of them worse though and they would get help. I would hear their stories and it was like an affirmation of what I went through. They'd say they didn't mean to do that. (Claus)
- I had a prostitute in the back seat who was hooked on heroin and she looked at me and said, we are on different sides of the law but said I just want to let you know that I respect you. And that one conversation did more for me than anything because it helped me realize this woman again is in a trap and yeah she is a prostitute but she is doing these things for reasons she does not want to. (Claus)
- I am in tuned with people. And I don't want to hurt people so I can only imagine what it felt like for her to hurt me or somebody else. I know she would want to make that right or someday she would...I hope. I would want to do the same but until you're there. If some guy rapes a girl, you can't immediately say you forgive him. I know that there are a lot of religions that expect you to do that. And you can say that in theory but until it is time and you can process that with both head, spirit, and mind you're only halfway there. You can say you are there but you are not. The older I've gotten that makes more sense every day. (Claus)

- It wasn't a good situation and in her best effort she did that and she didn't have much time. (Claus)
- I think judging my mom's motives, best I can I think she really thought...she was competitive...I think she wanted to win against my dad... but I think a lot of it was that she realized she blew the first 12 years of these kids' lives and thought she could do better. (Reese)
- I decided I was just going to be kind to this woman and talk to her about Jesus. And so, I tried to do that. She was reading books...I remember one book on her nightstand written by a guy who had a cleric's collar on and it was something to do with what to do with your religiously addicted child. So I am a problem who needs fixing here but I am going to be nice to her and talk to her about the Gospel and it was just hard through high school. (Reese)
- She [aunt] was the black sheep of the family. My aunt, my great-grandmother, she never let her eat dinner at the dinner table. She would beat her in places where the dress would cover up when she went to school. When she'd go places, she'd lock her in the closet and of course some of the other stuff and my dad was the oldest so he was around it and he saw her hurting and the angry outbursts...it was just an awful situation. (Howard)
- His dad, my grandfather he actually killed a man with his bare hands, he was in prison so they had to come live with them. And of course, they

knew before the crash and then moved in with them in Fort Worth they were just angry and bitter and everything else. My dad saw and heard and had to experience it and he got beat and everything else. He saw all that and was very angry over what life had given him, I guess you would say. But anyway, that carried over to our relationship when we were younger. (Howard)

- My dad was a very angry man. My dad saw that when he was a kid so seeing that I could kind of understand where he came from and why he handled things...it didn't make it right, but I empathized with him because I felt a little bit of the same thing when we were going through that with him when we were growing up. (Howard)
- My aunt she basically went back with our other aunt and went through the history of course to find out that my great-great-grandmother was a house slave and my great grandmother was half black. She'd been angry about that and it was just a bad situation. My aunt though went all the way back and showed the lineage and everything. It was amazing to find out where you came from and to see how all this happened and to see why my dad reacted the way he did. It was pretty amazing, I never knew that. (Howard)
- Dad had a pretty heck of a hard upbringing himself. He had a grandfather who would hardly even talk to him or anything else. (Twain)
- When I started losing my temper I could tell where it came from. The fighting when I was younger, that came from my father. All four of us

boys were like that though. We would fight at the drop of a hat. And he's like that. He would fight at the drop of a hat. Even when he was in his fifties he say, "I can't do this stuff no more, I am too beat." (Twain)

- You know, you have to put yourself in a man's shoes to understand stuff. And when you get to my age, you realize this stuff is not worth it. I loved my dad, you remember him as good ole dad, coaching us with football and stuff. The old stuff is gone. The bad stuff...just remember the good stuff. (Twain)
- He just started sobbing and I forgave him that instant. I saw he had suffered too. (Richard)
- I can get emotional thinking about him and seeing how broken he was and put myself in his shoes. I tried to imagine how he felt. He had another family and raised them up. He had told them all along. They always knew about my brother and me and said one of these days he is going to look for me and find me and y'all need to know about it. So, I do have another half-brother who I have gotten very close who I wasn't raised with. They knew about me growing up because he didn't want any surprises. So, I knew he had a lot of regret and maybe that helped me forgive him because I could see I wasn't the only one who suffered pain here. He suffered pain too. (Richard)
- I felt bad for him when I heard he had died. I actually felt sad for him. (Richard)

- He was a tormented man. For a lot of reasons. He was raised up and his dad beat his mom and probably him too. So he perpetuated that. (Richard)
- One day, he drove a tanker truck at that time, and he had come home and parked at the road and we were playing in the yard. He went in the house for a time, came out, got in his truck and started to leave. Well, he did have one son. He had one of my sisters, his son, and then he had my youngest sister. My youngest sister may not had been born yet, I don't know. But my brother was named Brian. He was 16 months. Toddled out under the truck and he ran over him and crushed him. I can still see his crushed body in my mind's eye. One of the things that has helped me work through it is one of the things I just said was that he was a tormented man so I have tried to use empathy to understand how I would feel. It does not excuse his behavior but just by trying to I told you when my natural father and I met he just broke and I realized he had been hurt too. I was able to use empathy to forgive him just instantly. It was dramatic. Everything went away. I think using the empathy to realize the torment he went through being raised in a similar situation and you know it was an accident but killing your only son, drank up the gravestone money... I mean I cannot imagine carrying that with me the rest of my life. That helps me too. It humanizes him. So, by humanizing him and recognizing his torment has helped me to forgive him too. Like I said, there is no excuse for his behavior but by humanizing him to a degree. (Richard)



- A lot of people use those terms and it is easy to stay mad at a monster but if you humanize them as somebody who has problems too it doesn't excuse their behavior but can help you forgive. (Richard)
- He was a tormented person which I did not realize that until after he had died. I told you it had kind of stunned me and stopped me in my tracks. It was a little after that I really thought, "Wow, he was a really tormented man" and it was shortly after that that I began going to church. (Richard)
- One of them was I remember at one point and my wife was there and she pushed back on some of the things he was saying like, "No you didn't do this..." and he said, "Well, my father did this and this and that and I know I did better than that..." And it just kind of shed this light because he thinks that he has been a really good father because he didn't do the things that his dad did. He didn't come to every football game but he did go to some of them. And maybe he didn't provide all the money but he did provide some money. So there was this huge disconnect in his head like the difference being just a really good father just an amazing father and a father who was acceptable because he was better than his. So it just really shed a light on this. (Jon)

**Relief.** Towards the end of the journey, participants reported feeling lighter.

Participants shared experiences of giving up the burden of carrying around the anger inside of them. Some stated that this was motivated by acts of self-preservation.

- I had the feeling of relief to let it go because I couldn't do anything with it. It was just eating me up. To accept I really did nothing to cause this.  
(Claus)
- I think the main thing was the relief. Knowing I don't have to live with this anymore. I'm not ever going to forget it and maybe it is good that I don't. But I don't have to let it affect the rest of my life. (Claus)
- It may sound selfish but I wanted to get that burden off. I wanted it to not hound me. It wasn't helping me at all. (Claus)
- Yes, the anger is all gone. There are too many other things to be angry about. I guess, I was just so angry for so long, that it just had to end... And it did. It took a period but it did. It is done and I am very happy it is done.  
(Claus)
- So, I realized from a self-preservation aspect I really started trying to forgive him of those things. (Richard)

**Substance abuse.** The participants revealed a theme of substance abuse in their emotional forgiveness experiences. Some participants indulged in substance abuse perpetuating the behavior and choices of their abusive parent prior to emotionally forgiving. Others shared their experiences of their abuser being under the influence and how that effected their relationship with their abusive parent. Participants shared how alcohol was a significant factor in their relationship with their abusive parent.

**Alcohol.** Alcohol was expressed frequently when participants were sharing their experiences of being abused by their parent. In addition to it being consumed in

unhealthy quantities by the abusive parent, many of the participants share experiences of their indulgence as well.

- Even as a kid when we would visit there was a time I remember specifically right at 13 probably and I had ridden with my grandpa at the ranch driving his truck a couple of times, and he had gotten so intoxicated and verbally abusive just talking trash and I threatened to steal his keys and drive back as a 13-year-old. (Jon)
- We were visiting him and he had taken us to a concert that was an outside venue and he had gotten completely plastered. And he forced my older sister and I into the car to drive us home even though we didn't want to. So we called my mom from the backseat of the car saying he's drunk, he's going to kill us, he's almost gotten into three wrecks already... we had stolen his phone to call her. But there was nothing she could do about it. There was nothing they could do about it in the end. (Jon)
- So, I dropped in and I remember the walls were sticky and shambled and totally looked like a drug house and we couldn't sit anywhere because everything was so dirty and I was completely embarrassed by whatever was going on. And I know we surprised him so to this day I know we should have announced to him but he couldn't drop what he was doing to come have lunch with us or dinner with us because he was too busy. I had always suspected that he had some substance abuse issues and his house

just kind of confirmed that and him not sparing 30 minutes or an hour to see us... so that was the last time I've ever visited him. (Jon)

- I'd say he [dad] is a high functioning alcoholic. If he has a bottle it will have water and vodka in there. And I always suspected he had harder substances so one time I found the pill form of methamphetamine and illegal pain killers. So, I think he had some uppers and downers. One point, not me, one of my sisters found a syringe with blood in it so I assume he [dad] shoots up or one of his girlfriend's shot up stuff. (Jon)
- We grew up in an upper-class family and she was an alcoholic. (Claus)
- It just got the point where... I remember when I was in 5th grade she asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I told her just for her not to drink when my friends come over. She would promise that and would kept it. She would be just rolling drunk. (Claus)
- She just had her downsides when it came to the alcohol. As we got older it got worse. (Claus)
- One night she was so drunk, she was walking around the kitchen and got her foot stuck under an appliance or cabinet or something and fell backwards and broke her foot. (Claus)
- My mom was a drunk for about 13-15 years. Just swallowed bottles and bottles of vodka. (Reese)
- It got really hard because my mom, when she drank she got violently abusive. (Reese)

- She would try to kill us on three or four different occasions. I can remember awful things that I don't want to repeat just to be gratuitous but just a few examples, I can remember being beaten with a mop handle over the head and chest and being tossed into a glass table and broke the table and had injuries because of that. I can remember a Christmas night being shot at...running through a field and mom shooting at us with a revolver. I remember one particular horrifying event was my mom grabbing my brother by the head of his hair with a revolver and pointing the revolver at his head with my brother screaming, "I'm sorry mommy! I'm sorry mommy!" (Reese)
- One time when I was certain I was going to die I was seven or eight and I had done something to inspire the wrath of mom and she had bent me backward over the counter in the sink and the sink was filling up with water and she was kind of drowning me backwards with my feet in the air and I remember all of a sudden it stopped and I remember the choking and gasping to breathe which was a blessing and my mom was on the floor screaming holding her arm and the humorous irony if you can bare it is that my twin brother who is "afraidy cat", I mean he was "afraidy cat". I was kind of the bold one and he was the one who would just sit there and hope she didn't get angry. He never did anything aggressive to my mom. He is standing there holding a vodka bottle by the neck and had wacked her in the elbow with it as hard as he could. There is a certain amount of

humor in my mind as I remember my brother holding the vodka bottle.

The vodka bottle about killed me that night and then vodka bottle saved my life that night. And if you know anything about vodka bottles, and my mom had a specific brand, but they are thick bottles. You can do some damage with those bottles. My mom died three years ago but her elbow bothered her until the day she died so there was some poetic justice there.

(Reese)

- Mom was passed out in her puke in the kitchen. (Reese)
- I can remember mom was really drunk. That was another time with the gun and we had run away from her. (Reese)
- Mom would be passed out in the house for days. I mean she would get up and swallow booze and pass out again. (Reese)
- Then all of a sudden mom calls and she says she has moved to Louisville, KN and has gotten sober. She had cancer and had nearly died and wanted to call and see how we were. She really was sober. As it turns out she would never take another drink of booze until the day she died. She did accidentally take a swig of champagne but that was funny and she didn't go back to her habit at that point. She didn't take another drink of alcohol with the exception of that accident again. (Reese)
- Well, when he drank he would get into a good mood. Mostly, he was a happy drunk. (Howard)

- I remember he'd [dad] come home and we'd work together for a while and he'd come home in a good mood you know but those were the times when everything was ok, when dad was drinking. (Howard)
- In the mornings, with the hangovers, that's when it got bad. (Howard)
- Well, the thing is we'd talked about it before and had been trying to quit drinking for a while and after I got my first DWI and when we started going to church we'd be sitting there drinking and ask ourselves why are we doing this? We were so sick and tired of being sick and tired of this but we have an addiction and can't kick it. (Howard)
- Oh, yeah, you see dad was also a drinker. I don't think he stopped until he was in his early 50's. (Twain)
- I have been in rehab a few times. I am an alcoholic. I have been in rehabs and stuff. (Twain)
- Well, I stayed sober for probably about 2 years and started drinking again. And recently, I had to quit again because I have cerosis of the liver because I drank hard. (Twain)
- I was on the streets for a while and I drank myself until my liver has gone bad on me. (Twain)
- Dad was an alcoholic, he liked to go to topless bars and I would go home on leave and he'd drag me to topless bars. He wanted to drink with me at that point. (Richard)

- His brother had talked him into coming and helping him manage those. He did come but they would close the McDonald's around 11 o'clock at night and he'd hit the bars and finally it got to the point where he was coming home at 4-5 in the morning and describe in lurid detail what he had just done with the woman he picked up at the bar and that went on for about a year. (Richard)
- He had a lot of health issues that were alcohol related. (Richard)
- He was addicted to the bars and the women there. (Richard)
- She told me at the time we lived within walking distance, a little town in South Florida, of the cemetery. He told her if he ever found out that she went to the grave to visit Brian he would beat her to death. I am like, that is kind of odd. Why would a man not want his wife to go visit their son's grave? And then she was just conversational and started telling me about how neighbors, people in the town, took up a collection to purchase a gravestone. Then it just hit me and I was like, "Mom, he forbade you to go because he drank up the headstone money." And she was like, "No, he wouldn't do that." So I had her give me the information and I called up the funeral home and had them look in their records, find where his grave was and call me back. A period of time went by and they called me back and said yeah, they found his grave and told me the number. I asked them if they would mind going out to check if there was a marker. They did and there was none. So that is what had happened. So, I said he was a



tormented man. I mean, number one, I don't know how any man ran over his only son and killed him and number two, drank up the grave stone money. (Richard)

**Cognitive distortions.** Cognitive distortions are negative beliefs individuals hold about themselves. The distortions are ways of convincing oneself of something that is not really true. These inaccurate thoughts are most commonly used to reinforce negative emotions or thinking and are frequently seen in abuse survivors.

- To catch up with what was lost or didn't have, back when I needed it. And that's why I got so much into him. Following this sort of incident and being jealous for my friends. So, that's why I kind of dived into this relationship. I needed it. It was my fault. (Alex)
- He made me believe that I needed to prove myself worthy of his attention. (Alex)
- I was so ashamed that I missed something. (Alex)
- I'm so embarrassed that a grown-up man with family and responsibilities almost lost my family because of these events. I blame myself.
- I should be so stupid and reckless I guess. (Alex)
- If I were to fall into feelings again or excuses and have the same type of anger or the same line of feelings, I will screw up again. This thing really haunts me my entire life. I trust people too much. With dad, that was the worst case. The worst case ever. (Alex)
- That was my fault. (Alex)

- I fell to feelings and got to close, got them to close to myself. (Alex)

**Making meaning of the abuse.** Finding meaning in one's experiences is part of the existential quests of life. This is no different when the experiences are traumatic. In fact, finding meaning may be even more paramount in these circumstances. The participants found solace and comfort in their quest for meaning to understand why they experienced the abuse from their parent.

*Consequences.* One expression of meaning was that there are consequences to choices. Good choices lead to good consequences; however, unhealthy choices lead to poor consequences. Participants shared how boundaries were established with their abusive parent as a consequence for their unhealthy choices.

- I've given him topics that we can discuss. I have lots of brothers and sisters and I was noticing that he would put me in the middle of any dispute he was having with someone else. I told him he can talk to me about me or my family. You can talk to me about politics or religion. You can talk to me about finances and that sort of stuff. But I will not talk to you about other family members and kind of set that ground work for him. And then when we had our kid, I had to set that ground work with him. Since he uses substances, I had to tell him you will not drive with them, you will not be alone with them. I just had to be frank with him. I said you can love on them and we will be around, but you are not going to have those other opportunities. I feel like that has actually helped because he realizes he cannot hide behind that shadow... we know. You are not going

to be alone with your grandchild and this is why. And maybe we would lesson it one day if we ever felt that he wasn't doing that stuff anymore but the reality is here is the groundwork that you can live with us by or we are at a point in our lives where we don't need your money and we don't need you...we have grandparents just fine on both sides. It would be really sad if we lost that but we have to live within this range here because you could hurt your grandchild and that is unacceptable. (Jon)

- That's why the really hard guidelines and honesty has really helped the relationship. (Jon)
- I think where I also became ok is I realized I could forgive and let go of all those pieces but that does not mean I forget by any means. That doesn't mean I start playing stupid. But being very cognizant of that but in a real way and not in a fake way. And like I said, if I ever felt all that stuff got resolved in his life, I would be willing to let more pieces go and kind of loosen the reigns a little bit but I would have to have true evidence of that happening before I could do that. (Jon)
- Well I won't be totally done with them I just won't trust them anymore. That is the best I can do. If I don't trust you I won't turn my back on you. (Claus)
- And that is one of the things from my understanding of reading the Bible is that God commands us to forgive but he doesn't say you have to keep putting yourself in situations and I chose to stop putting myself in those

situations. I have family; uncle, cousins, and they are still living that kind of lifestyle of hitting the bars. They beat their wives. I haven't seen them in 30 years. I don't have any hard feelings against them but I don't want to visit them either. I just don't want to be around that. And that is the way I was with him. That was the easiest thing to do. (Richard)

- What is forgiveness, you can do that to me again and I'm thinking yeah, no way. You can forgive a loan of someone not paying you back and not want to loan the money to the same person again. (Alex)
- And him trying to pull another string. But that didn't work. And it was so obvious to me that after everything he'd done. He was trying to pull the same string again. Bringing in health issues and saying yeah I might not see you again. That's what I started to feel so uninvited because the person who'd done all that to me doesn't even realize the consequences and my feeling towards him. (Alex)

**Responsibility.** Participants agreed that they have to take responsibility for their feelings. Many participants held desires for their abusive parent to take responsibility for their actions; however, did not hold their emotional forgiveness as ransom if this did not take place.

- This group is angry about this reason and that group is angry for that reason... everyone is angry now and no one is taking responsibility for their emotions. That was another thing I realized. I am responsible for my

own emotions. I can't shift the blame. It was my job to deal with it, no one else's. (Richard)

- Most people, and it may be crass to compare people to a hog but people like to wallow and feel victimized... It's never my fault... If I could do one thing to empower people it would make them realize they are in control of their own emotions and they are responsible for them. It is no one else's. We all choose how to react. We have kneejerk reactions but for that to persist beyond the kneejerk, that is a choice. People are where they are because that is what they have chosen for themselves. (Richard)
- Yes, but those first three years were really hard. With the DWI's they take away your driver's license for two years and your insurance is still messed up for another year even after you get your license back. You still have that SR22 after you get your license back whenever you have a DWI or any other kind of restrictions. So the three years, it was brutal. It was a test. The things we had done to get to that point, we had to get our lives straightened out and in so doing that and working towards that goal, it was tough. (Howard)
- Like I said you are responsible not just for your life, but you have responsibilities for kids, family to take care of. If I were to fall into feelings again or excuses and have the same type of anger or the same line of feelings, I will screw up again. (Alex)

- He said Sue filed the report for the trademark and it's going to take a year and it does. It does take almost a year to register it. I asked Sue when we were driving to Granbury and she said it wasn't trademarked. I said for the beer and she said I didn't file it. And I said well dad said you did. And she's like, well so she started to cover up for him. So, I stopped the dialogue not to go further. But then he asked me and Sue in his office and he was like, why were you doing this? Do you think I'm lying to you? Do you think I'm using this money somewhere else? I am a wealthy man who made himself a millionaire. Where were you asking these questions? How dare you. (Alex)
- I started asking questions to Sue and the things she told me... she probably didn't know it or he [dad] didn't tell her. Or maybe he forgot something, but that's when I got this suspicious feeling that things aren't matching up. That's when I followed up and started paying attention. I knew it was all hypocrisy. (Alex)
- I missed this type of relationship my entire life. I can't imagine what kind of conditions and environment would need to be around me to not have this sort of hunger for this type of father and son relationship. And that's where I lost the attention of consciences... Where I was blindly following. I was in hunger for this relationship. (Alex)
- I was saying you [dad] were threatening me to call the police and ruin my visa and everything and you know how sensitive I was and how important

it was to me. And how many things I've worked towards getting back and moving the family to the U.S. and you were threatening to call the police because a few blankets were left in a storage along with all my stuff. He said, well, something like, I'm tired of paying for this storage. And I'm paying for it because I'm waiting for you to return and it's a good gesture that I'm sorry that things went south. Even this was bullshit, because I kept paying for the storage. The guy called me and said "hey, are you going to pay for that, because I'm going to put it all for sale". I said, I thought my dad was paying for that. Well, he said no, I haven't received a check or anything. So, I went online and got an account and paid for the storage. I didn't tell him [dad] that, but I used it a couple of times. I said, hey dad do you keep paying for the storage. He said, yeah, it's almost a grand. I said yeah, I know, yeah, I've been paying for that. I knew it was almost a grand that I spent. He kept telling me that he paid and when he would get mad he would bring it up and say, hey I'm sick of paying for the storage. You got to do something. I was glad that I caught him. I figured that, probably 90% of all that I was told was somehow bull crap. But the money was lost and the money that he spent on finishing the space for the beer store. And so on and so on. And I was like, I don't know. And I remember back then, when I brought this conversation first up. I went to the beer store and I realized there was no remodel or finishing going on. And I was like dad, don't you want to tell me something...? (Alex)

**Effects of emotional abuse.** A theme that continued to surface was how much more damaging emotional abuse was for them compared to physical abuse. Participants shared how physical injuries healed; however, the scars from the emotional abuse were something very different to overcome.

- My father was just very neglectful. I will give an example, when I was learning how to ride a bike when I was a kid, this was just a memory that kind of popped up, my father, every time I would fall off the bike would pick me up by the back of my shirt and kick me with his foot on the back of my behind. But where I think he was being very neglectful during that time period was when he left our family and moved out of state, my grandfather came in and was trying to teach me, same summer, how to ride a bike and when I would fall off he would say, “Ok, it is time to get back up and try again...” and I would ask, “Well, you’re not going to kick me?” ...I am a five year old. And he said, “No, I will never kick you for trying to learn something...” and that very next time I got on the bike and was able to ride the bike like I had been riding for years. (Jon)
- Specifically, times when he said he would show up for something and then didn’t show up for things. I just remember those being really crushing... all throughout my childhood even when I graduated high school, you have graduation, well he showed up to the graduation party late and then our graduation was supposed to take place at our football stadium and it ended up raining really bad so we only got a certain amount of tickets and so he



told me I could give his ticket to someone else and he was going to go ahead and head home. So, I remember that at graduation and other sporting events that he said he'd show up and didn't and had all the excuses in the world for why. There was always a reason why in his book. (Jon)

- You always want to look good and do good and when you look up at your practices or games and he is not there especially when he's said he was going to be. When looking back, I think that was really tough. (Jon)
- He had four years where he was not technically divorced from my mom and did not provide any financial help to the family. One Christmas he just randomly showed up, like literally walked in the back door and walked in with a saga genesis and realized we didn't have a TV to hook it up to. So, it was like, "Thanks dad..." "We can't play with it..." It was things like that that he was completely neglectful. Each of us before they divorced, each of us kids had a college account that we could grow into but he actually left when my youngest sisters, they are twins, so they never got a college account established. When it came time to college, he said there was no money as opposed to the rest of us we all had money to go to college, he said, "nope, there's no money... take out your loans..." So, it was just things like that that he didn't provide for. (Jon)
- He was trying to pull the same string again. Bringing up "health issues" and saying yeah, I might not see you again. (Alex)

- It was more emotional. It was either screaming and yelling or the sweet buttery up, “How are you doing today” that just made you want to throw up because you knew come night it would be just the opposite. (Claus)
- The foot incident was probably the worst because that hurt more than anything. (Claus)
- Until you’re out of it you go, “Whoa, that was bad...” I’d rather get hit. That pain goes away but the emotional doesn’t. Yeah, you don’t ever forget it. If two guys get into a fight, that’s it and it’s over. They will be laughing about it a year later. You don’t constantly think about that fight being horrible. Like the other kind. It will wane in its importance later but it is not like a pain of physical abuse or being hit. (Claus)
- Of course, we got beaten sometimes, but most of it was verbal. (Howard)
- I was born and no permanent teeth grew under my baby teeth and he would sometimes call me a toothless no good bastard and that will tear your guts out being called stuff like that. That’s the main thing... just calling me the horrible nasty names. (Twain)
- Verbal, that is what hurt me more. After getting your ass whipped, that goes away after a little while. The verbal you can’t forget it. (Twain)
- My family was originally from Indiana and he had moved us down to Florida right after he and my mother married. So there was no family to be accountable to and abusers do that...they isolate their victims. (Richard)

- From the time we moved to Indiana when I was 12-13, the worst things I remember were more emotional verbal type of abuse. And you know the Bible says a wound will heal but the sharp words, emotional abuse, the pain from that can last a lifetime. I think that is what I carried with me more than the physical abuse was the emotional abuse because that is what it evolved to by the time I moved out. (Richard)

**Forgiving because Christ first forgave me.** As participants' motivation evolved from self-preservation to honoring what Christ calls His followers to do, more experiences were shared about their emotional forgiveness from their Lord and Savior. This theme surfaced as participants discussed processing their experiences and shifting their emotional response towards their abusive parent from anger and vengeance to compassion and empathy.

- The obvious thing is they need to for their own well-being and the well-being of their spouse, their children. They need to forgive. (Richard)
- If they want to be obedient Christians they have to forgive and if they are not Christians if they ever want healthy relationships with family and children they need to forgive because it spills over onto others. (Richard)
- I think that the example that my grandfather showed us and taught us and the work ethic he had in our lives I think has always been that beacon or that thing for us to look at so us growing up I can think of a time I wrecked my truck and ended up hydroplaning or something and my grandfather ended up giving me the money to get it fixed and as

repayment I had to go cut wood with him. We had to cut over a couple of days about two cords of wood and I remember not only is he making me this so that I would know the value of work ethic and know that I messed up and get taught that lesson of forgiveness but he cut the wood with me. He walked right along beside me during that time period so not only was he showing me grace and mercy but he was walking along side of me and I think that is just such a great picture of what we should be doing as well as Christians and as people who are constantly trying to forgive people around us that we are first walking with them in that relationship with them before that forgiveness can take place. We have to have that relationship someone before we have to strive to have a relationship...walk beside them before anything impactful takes place amongst those people. I think the Lord's Prayer has a cadence to it along with a message to it so "Our Father who art in Heaven hallow be His name" so Holy is thy Father...Our kingdom come our will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven so please tell me what I can do I'm here on Earth, you've sent your son so tell me what to do. Give us this day our daily bread so thanks for the food and providing for us and forgive us of our sins first so forgive me of all of my transgressions so all the things I have done wrong and out of that I can go out and forgive others who have sinned against me. So first forgive me so I can be in a place to forgive others. That is how Jesus taught us how to pray. (Jon)

- Go over and forgive. And churches tell you the same thing. Then you see other people forgiving, even small things. If you're not gonna let it go if you're not gonna go over it yourself or find peace with yourself, it's going to consume you from inside. You're going to live with it and you're not going to be able to focus on your own goals. (Alex)
- It says in the Bible, if you have a hard heart or you have something holding you back you can't get closer to God. That is very paraphrased and watered down... but that is what it is saying. If you have something that you are bitter about you won't be filling the Holy Spirit. You also can't walk on both sides of the fence. You can't walk with the Devil on one side and God on the other. (Claus)
- Every knee shall bow before the Father and I'll have to do it and she'll have to do that. I feel like it was my place to forgive her. It was for me. I needed to do that because I was told to Biblically. (Claus)
- And there just started to be this winsome aroma of Jesus with my mom and then I was in her living room one afternoon and we were talking about First John chapter one the 8th and 9th verses where if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins of all unrighteousness and my mom started to cry and said she wanted to pray and do this. So I said let's do it. She asked if we could get on our knees and I said yeah, we can get on our knees. So, she laid her, it was my grandfather's Bible, she wanted to read that one, she laid it on the loveseat and we got down on our knees

and I got to hear my mom ask Jesus to forgive her of her sins. And there my mom was forgiven. (Reese)

- You know what Mary, I forgive you. And I can forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. (Reese)
- The first thing is you have to forgive. This is what Jesus says. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if don't forgive your brother from your heart. You have to forgive. You have to forgive it from the heart. You have to really mean it and let it go. The Greek word behind the English word forgiveness means to release, to let it go. You have to let go of the evil, bitterness and wrath and slander. You have to let it go from the heart. You have to mean it. It is interesting in Matthew chapter 18 where there is this servant who has this enormous debt... 10,000 talents... a day worker could never pay that off. And he gets forgiven. Then he goes to another man who owes him a debt. A hundred denarii and he won't forgive it. Why wouldn't he forgive? The reason he wouldn't forgive is because he was thinking about what he was owed instead of the greatness he had been forgiven. (Reese)
- Show me someone who refuses to forgive and I will show you an arrogant person who refuses to reflect on the grace they have received in their own forgiveness. (Reese)
- The point is if you don't forgive, you don't get the Gospel. If you don't forgive you don't get the grace that is extended to you. (Reese)

- When you get oceans of grace from a Father you have sinned against every day, all day long... When you receive that, you have little teaspoons of forgiving grace you can afford to give to other people. Jesus is saying, if you can't forgive, you don't get your own forgiveness. (Reese)
- You know the Bible says if you're not willing to forgive I am not going to forgive you. Those were the kinds of things that were already there but after I became a Christian it just sealed it and it became cemented. (Howard)
- Aside the passages that I have already talked about, if you are a Christian and you are not willing to forgive, God will not forgive you. That is so very important. Anytime you have unforgiveness, a lot of the time the person you are unwilling to forgive has no idea you are holding something against them. All that bitterness builds up in your heart and everything and you're only hurting yourself. God says it, clear as day, if you are not willing to forgive God is not willing to forgive you. That is your obligation as a Christian to do for that person. Even if it is something they did to you and you're sinning because you are having ugly thoughts about that right there instead of getting... you know sometimes you just have to forgive them and it's not something that you have to verbally come up and ask them for forgiveness. You know Charles Stanley, I cut my teeth on Charles Stanley when I first became a Christian and he'd agree. He talks about forgiving people who are dead and I had to do that. I had people to

forgive who were dead. In my mind, I basically sat them down in a chair and asked them to forgive me and did that with the living ones I couldn't see. And you wouldn't believe the weight that is off your shoulders when you forgive the people who have done anything wrong to you. You build up that bitterness and chances are they have no idea. The only person you're hurting is yourself. So, there are several things there. Forgiveness is something that is so very important. (Howard)

- From what I understand, the Bible tells us we have to forgive everyone for everything so that is what I try to do. (Twain)
- That is when I joined a Bible class and started reading the Bible and it is always about forgiveness. There are places all throughout the Bible that talk about forgiveness and if you don't forgive, you won't get to see that Lord in Heaven. And that is something I really want to do. People ask me if I am a believer, and I say no, I am a knower. I know it happened. I truly believe and want to be there. It is something that I believe in and know to be true. I have been taught all my life. Mother started sending us to church as young men, little boys and vacation Bible school and all that stuff. Mama was always good at getting us in church. (Twain)
- You come across the verse of scripture that says, "Forgive as you've been forgiven" and I started really thinking about forgiveness then. (Richard)
- I would question God, do you know my heart, have I really forgiven him, please if I haven't let's bring it up. I want to get rid of it; I want it all gone.



I don't want to carry any hard feelings. I am doing ok now, but there are times when I can bring up some things and from time to time sharing my experiences with others to help them, that pain will come back. (Richard)

- And that is one of the things from my understanding of reading the Bible is that God commands us to forgive but he doesn't say you have to keep putting yourself in situations and I chose to stop putting myself in those situations. (Richard)
- The forgiveness had started before I went to church and after I started going to church it came back years later. My biggest thing through it all was I wasn't sure if I had forgiven him. I kept asking God if I had really forgiven him. Like David, search my heart bring these things up now. I want to confess these things and get rid of them. I want to forgive him. From time to time something would come up and I would deal with it, pray about it and knock that one away. Then something else would come up and finally it was the total package. It was nothing earth shattering like Paul on his way to Damascus... that was pretty earth shattering. It was kind of something I faded into. (Richard)
- You are never going to be the Christian you need to be if you are carrying around baggage like that. They need to forgive. If they want to be obedient Christians they have to forgive and if they are not Christians if they ever want healthy relationships with family and children they need to forgive because it spills over onto others. (Richard)

**God's Grace.** The participants shared their weaknesses in their journey of emotional forgiveness and gave credit to their Lord and Savior. These experiences came out as the participants shared their dramatic shift in how they perceive their abusive parent and the kind of relationship they strive to have once emotional forgiveness had been achieved.

- The second domino that helped change my heart and change how I see things is that my wife challenged me by saying the expectation is very low. What he actually say he is going to do and what he's actually going to follow through with is very low so if he calls you and says I am swinging through town tomorrow, let's get dinner. The expectation shouldn't be, let's get dinner but he is who he is and he's probably not going to show up. So if does show up you can count that as a blessing. So you just reshape or reimage the expectations it really does in a way almost help the relationship because then you can think of those small moments you are having with him as blessings for a very, in my opinion, still a very sick and I think he just has issues in his own life... so I can view those gleams of hope as blessings. (Jon)
- I think how that extra piece or chamber of mine opened up and how not only God had to send his son to do that but he had to let it happen for these people who he has created yes, but are not His son, I think is the constant reminder of how we has humans can try and strive to work on these things all we want in an imperfect world in an imperfect way and really try our

best and we are only able to do this through the grace He has given us in our lives. That is the only way we can even start to have this conversation is because we were first given grace. (Jon)

- I don't want him to get hurt or I don't want him to have anything happen to him like that. Absolutely not. I had too many examples of how not to be. And it's a good example of assimilating yourself. I don't want that happening to him or anything bad happening to him because I'm not the way he is and I don't want to do anything similar. I'm not over him or better than him. That's why it's important to me to not be angry about what he had done. I don't regret that. I'm disappointed that that happened... (Alex)
- As far as when you were talking about forgiving someone. I was never very good at when someone told me I needed to forgive someone just because I needed to. I was never very good at that. It had to come to me naturally. I had to naturally get to that point. And when I did it was real but I just couldn't automatically forgive them. I'd be lying. Because if I was still hurt or hacked, it was going to be a while. (Claus)
- I mean, I think she earned it [emotional forgiveness] by just the grace of God. (Claus)
- I feel lucky as a kid because I had a grandfather who was really close and he could be that father figure so I got to see how he treated his wife. Kids

always know more than parents want to believe they know. So, I always knew as a kid that what was happening here was not right. (Jon)

- I feel very blessed that I did not grow up with him because of the small amounts of times he was there and was that poor example my gut and my experience of working with kids and what he is nowadays, him being around could have been a very negative impact in my life instead of the kind of man I am today. So, I actually feel blessed that they split up and he lived far away so I didn't have that direct impact in my daily life. It is hard to say that as a kid but looking back as an adult... (Jon)
- I had a pastor one time who had a member who was going through a lot of stuff in life and struggling with a lot of stuff and he said something along the lines if it wasn't for the sin in our lives this wouldn't be all messy and I shot back and said, it's because of the sin in our lives that we can realize we're messy and; therefore, we have to rely on our God. And I think that is such a true statement in my life as well. I have to realize the messiness I had in my life growing up and the pain and all the stuff and the way my mom was treated and the things I think are unforgiveable are actually not mine to forgive. I don't have that power. It is up to me to continue to love those who want to be in my life and those who are in my life because He is the one who is going to forgive me for all of my wretchedness and everything else. (Jon)

- I met all of my friends and in the providence of God all of them were Christians. The 3-4 people that I wound up meeting initially and spending time with were Christians. They went to a Baptist church near the high school and they said why don't you come. I said I'll go to church with you. I would go to church Sunday night. I didn't want to wake up and go Sunday morning but I'll go Sunday night. It'll get me out of the house for a little while. So, I went to church Sunday night and a dear woman named [name removed] who coordinated the youth group activities she took an interest in me and said why don't you come to this winter retreat that we are going to have and I couldn't afford to go. (Reese)
- I don't remember a blessed thing the speaker said that weekend but I do remember it was about prayer. I do remember thinking the message was that God hears our prayers and I was thinking that is really something. God can hear our prayers. We were asked to go and be alone and pray in the way we were talking about and I remember just thinking wow, God hears our prayers. How can he do that? How can he hear everyone's prayer? And just being overwhelmed by the bigness of a God who could do that and then reflecting on the fact that God has been hearing my prayer. That prayer that night on the campus of Morehead State University. Prayers running through the snow. Prayers staying up late laying on our waterbed. I can remember thinking God has been answering my prayers because I am not dead yet. I am not in Hell. It makes me want

to keep praying that I won't go to Hell. Door opens up and [name removed] walks in and sits down and asked me what I was thinking about and I told her some of what I've shared with y'all and she shared the Gospel with me. It was February 20, 1994 and she shared the Gospel with me and I believed it. It was as simple as that. (Reese)

- She [mom] softened a bit. It was still uncomfortable and weird at times and I would call with some irregularity and would go home and visit for holidays but it wasn't close by any stretch but softer than it had been. (Reese)
- Mom was really drawn to Sarah. Really drawn to her sweet tender personality quality and the winsome way she talked about her relationship with Christ and my mom had softened towards Jesus but I think Sarah was the first person who made Jesus really winsome to her. We kept sharing the Gospel and trying to bring my mom to faith and as she continued to soften toward the Gospel it became evident that the Lord was working in her heart and she would ask questions and was interested and seeing that there was something different in the way we were living life and my brothers and their wives and ex-wives were living their lives. (Reese)
- And there just started to be this winsome aroma of Jesus with my mom and then I was in her living room one afternoon and we were talking about First John chapter one the 8th and 9th verses where if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins of all unrighteousness and my

mom started to cry and said she wanted to pray and do this. So I said let's do it. She asked if we could get on our knees and I said yeah, we can get on our knees. So, she laid her, it was my grandfather's Bible, she wanted to read that one, she laid it on the loveseat and we got down on our knees and I got to hear my mom ask Jesus to forgive her of her sins. And there my mom was forgiven. (Reese)

- She was a changed woman. She walked into my dad's living room who she mistreated for decades like he was the scum of the earth she walked into his living room and said, "Tom, I am so sorry. I committed adultery. I made your life miserable. I kicked you out of our house on Christmas. And it was all my fault." Her testimony was that he did not do anything wrong. He was a faithful, good man and didn't deserve the woman he married and asked for his forgiveness. One of the most dramatic realities was that she called the wife of the man with whom she committed adultery so now it had been 2 and a half decades or so. This woman had hated my mom and her kids...oh my goodness. You can imagine. Dad is running around with this floosy and making a plan to leave. She hated my mother. Said awful words about her that were true. And my mom calls this woman. She says, "I wanted to ask your forgiveness for ruining your marriage." Ultimately, she did leave her husband. They made a plan to not leave together but when things broke off with my mom he met someone else to cheat with and she left him at that point, his wife did. She said I

was hugely responsible for the end of your marriage and I am a Christian now and wanted to call you and ask you for your forgiveness. This woman said you know what, I forgive you. And I can forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. (Reese)

- This is probably the 8th time I've told this story, and each time I can't believe the exploding grace of Jesus' forgiveness in all of these people's lives. (Reese)
- About four years after all that happened, my mom walked with the Lord. She found a church. She would call me up and she would have questions about the Bible. Questions about how to pray. Theological questions that would just blow your mind. I am sitting there as a minister of the Gospel and just thinking about the last 13 years how my mom has been hating on Jesus and now is calling me up asking questions about faith whether the preacher preached a biblical sermon that day. She'd call me up and say, I don't think this was Biblical and I'd say, "Mom that is not Biblical." She was the real deal. (Reese)
- I was able to talk to her and ask her, "Mom you trust Jesus don't you?" and she said, "Yeah, I trust Jesus." I told her, "Jesus is going to take care of you. Jesus is going to have you in this." She asked me to read the Bible to her and I read second Corinthians 4 and 5 and it was just uh, it was the last conversation I had with her. It was unbelievably precious that this woman who had tried to kill me 3-4 occasions, hated Jesus, hated me, and



the last earthly conversation I had with this woman was second

Corinthians. And I was able to preach that text at her funeral. (Reese)

- The most defining reality of who we are is not the bad things that happen to us. But are the bad things I have done that Jesus forgave. I am not an abused little boy who grew up. I am a sinner who Jesus saved. And if you are a Christian, that is the defining reality about you too. You don't see that when you are self-centered and arrogant and inward and only evaluate your life by what's happened to in instead of what Jesus Christ has done for you. (Reese)
- Whenever, I got arrested for my second DWI and I got into that cop car August 26, 2000 I gave my life to Christ. I thought I was a Christian before but I was kidding myself and I committed my life to Christ at that time. He had been working on my heart for a while. He revealed to me when I'd preach a couple years back, about a year back, in between my first and second DWI I didn't want to be a part of that at all. (Howard)
- When I started doing what I needed to do to become a pastor, you could see the changes and specifically you could see the changes when I became the pastor at Brazos River Baptist church. The changes were obvious. The conversations we had like the last one we had two weeks before he died, I mean there was no question in my heart that my dad was a Christian. On that day, August 26, 2000, that is when my relationship changed with everybody. (Howard)

- Don't get me wrong, I sometimes would have to diffuse situations that were going on. I'd have to go over there and sit down and talk and everything else but at that point I was able to do that and my dad was receptive to it instead of resistant so that was a blessing right there to be able to do that with my dad. (Howard)
- Psalms 37:4, delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart. Trust also in Him and He will do it. It will bring forth your righteousness and make it shine like the dawn, your justice like noonday. (Howard)
- All these doors that were closed, all of a sudden opened up and for those three years it was a huge test to see if we would stay faithful to our walk with God. During that three-year walk (name removed) and I were faithful. It was the hardest time of our life but spiritually speaking it was the most fulfilling than any other time I can point to walking through that and God blessing us through that. God just pouring out his blessings on us. Looking back on all that its cool to see how God brought us through it. Now we've set up a business and God has blessed us... (Howard)
- More than anything seeing God's faithfulness through all of it. And more than anything else, I see that. I see how we got through it. I see how we got from point A to point B and beyond. It is pretty wild. That would be it more than anything else, God's faithfulness through everything we dealt

with. Every single one of God's promises is true. God can change your life if you let Him. (Howard)

- When God forgives you he says he throws it as far as the East is from the West and so I let it go and it was over with as far as I was concerned it was all gone then. So I forgave him then and hadn't thought about anything like that. I never get mad about things that used to happen and stuff. When I forgave him I forgave him that is it. I forget it. (Twain)
- No when it was over it was over. God helped me. (Twain)
- Thank God, I was able to forgive the things that she [ex-wife] had done to me and now we are better friends than we were when we were married. (Twain)
- It taught me more about forgiveness than anything because the first two years after the divorce were just horrible and afterwards I had to learn how to forgive people. I just had to. (Twain)
- One of the men who spoke at his memorial was a man he had spoke to about Jesus and he came to know the Lord. I thought that was crazier than ever. As crazy as my dad was and to think he was going to talk to people about Jesus, I didn't think it was in my dad. God can change anybody's heart. I totally believe that. (Twain)
- I said I thought God had given me some kind of insight? A lot of boys grow up and want to be like their dad. All my memories growing up I

thought, “I do not want to be like my dad, I do not want to be like my dad...” That was like a mantra for me. (Richard)

- Once I started dealing with myself and the Lord was dealing with me too from a point of honesty, things slowly started getting better. There was no magic moment when I was like, “whoa, the pain is suddenly gone...” I mean it was a process but when I looked back on it I was like “wow, the pain is gone... and I have forgiven”. It just kind of works out the other side and look back on it. That is how it was for me. I didn’t get on my knees and pray, “please Lord take this pain away from me” and everything was done, it wasn’t like that at all. This was a several year process. (Richard)

- If God can change that monster, if the Gospel can do that to that monster, I mean I’m on fire for the Gospel. (Richard)
- I don’t buy the “I can’t forgive” ...God’s given us all the grace to forgive so I just don’t buy it. (Richard)

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

In a phenomenological study, measures to ensure quality and accuracy are dire to trustworthiness of the findings. To confirm the findings accurately reflected the phenomenon, I followed the interview guide with questions based on peer-reviewed literature, theoretical frameworks, and input I received from methodological and content area experts. My familiarity with the culture of abuse, provided background and I

reworded questions and referred back to previously covered data when necessary to ensure exhaustive and accurate coverage of the phenomenon. Through a member checking process, the participants confirmed that their experiences had been accurately captured (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). To further ensure credibility, an independent peer review as described by Creswell (2007) was completed by a Walden University professional versed in qualitative research design and validated the study's findings.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to how much study results relate to other situations. This demands that readers are able to interpret and relate to research results as relevant and meaningful to them (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). Rich contextual accounts were provided by an array of participants. Their accounts should help the reader associate to the reality of the participants' experiences and encourage transferability of the results. (Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

I provided a clear, thorough account of my research methods. My typed transcriptions, field notes itemizing my coding efforts, and reflective self-evaluative journal, function as an audit trail of the research process I followed (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). The audit trail includes a list of codes evaluated by Nvivo software, audio-recordings, and my handwritten notes. This thorough explanation permits for an independent review and provides the reader full comprehension of the research process and the possibility of future study replication.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is closely associated with dependability and addresses objectivity (Shenton, 2004). To address confirmability, I provided an audit trail so that results can be confirmed. I meticulously documented how the data were collected, analyzed, and rechecked throughout the duration of the study. In addition, I maintained a continuing reflective journal to record the research process, along with reflections regarding research decisions.

## **Results**

This study aimed to answer the central research question: What are the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents? The seven adult men participants shared intimate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors around their relationship with their abusive parent. Their experiences during the emotional forgiveness process involved a wide range of intense emotions and significant daily stress. They experienced confusion, hatred, relief, anger, fear, hurt, empathy, and guilt. Emotions ranged in intensity, including confusion over what they had done to cause the abuse from their parent, significant fear about the possibility they might die at the hands of their parent, relief that another day would come and they were still alive, and then re-living the associated ups and downs repeatedly. The participants often described emotional forgiveness as a process that required a lot of personal work and grace.

The results of the phenomenological analysis revealed eight themes derived from a range of responses, codes, and categories organized by likeness. The participants expressed both heavy and lighter emotions throughout their journey. Thus, the lived

experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents is experienced as a roller coaster of changing realities through which the survivors often do not have any direct control. The wellbeing of the participant and obedience to their God is the pivotal point that guides decisions of emotional forgiveness and life-choices of offering grace to others.

To develop a full understanding of the research question, the question will be discussed referencing themes as appropriate.

### **Coping**

The methods of coping were not stagnant. At times participants coped with their circumstances in harmful and destructive ways.

- I just totally avoided her. I mean she never went needing something and I wouldn't help her. If she needed something, I would help her. I just wouldn't go over there and hang out. I would go over there, do what I needed to do and leave. (Claus)
- I just wanted to get away from it. That's why I moved out. And I think when I moved out that is when the forgiveness started because it wasn't going to happen while I was still there. Because as soon as you turned around something else was going to happen. (Claus)
- I'm going to be in high school and I'll graduate and then I am moving as far away as I can get. Which meant back to Mount Sterling. But I am going to get as far away from this woman as I can and I am never going to talk to her again. (Reese)

- I was able to kind of separate myself. I was there physically but I would go somewhere else in my mind to try to get through. (Richard)
- In the home that I grew up in it was avoidance. We did not want his attention on us because it was usually not pleasant so there was a lot of fear in the home growing up. So that was my typical interaction, I just tried to avoid him as much as possible. (Richard)
- If he did something that really overjoyed me like give me a gift or something, he'd find a way to take it away later to crush me. Or if he did something to crush me and he saw that, he'd do it continually. No matter how I feel because that was a coping mechanism, something that I decided to do. I viewed it as a game growing up and I just decided to not play the game no matter what he said. I just offered no reaction, positive or negative, no matter what it did to me on the inside. (Richard)

Other coping skills were positive and did not involve avoidance. These coping skills allowed the participants to address their emotions for what they were and attempt to replace them.

- No, he's gone now and I just hope like heck I get to see him in Heaven. That is all I can wish for. Because he had become a pretty good Christian by the time he passed away. (Twain)
- Scripture, talks with Perry. Of course, Cindy and I getting together praying, spending time in our devotional and with the Lord. (Howard)



- I was trying to do the best I could do to walk with the Lord and live my Christian life for a year... (Reese)
- I talk about this to friends, I had people praying for me ... (Reese)

### **Evolution of emotions**

The emotions that were experienced by the participants were constantly evolving; however, there was a general progression that most of the participants followed. They usually started off feeling afraid for their safety and when they weren't in survival mode, they expressed significant amounts of anger towards their abuser.

- The thing I believed Jesus to be taking from me was the hatred that I felt for my mother. (Reese)
- I relished the afternoons when she wasn't home because I hated her, couldn't stand her. I don't mean that like some sophomore in high school who might say in a random situation, "ugh I just hate my mom and dad...oh I just can't stand her". I didn't mean that. I had settled anger in my heart towards my mom and was counting down. (Reese)
- I hated her. Really hated her. And the reason I hated her was because my mom was an awful woman. Probably in the top 3 most horrific, most terrible people I have ever known in my life. (Reese)
- You don't remember a lot from when you are three but I can remember flashes from that night. I can remember my mom screaming and my dad on his knees crying and my older brothers around them and I remember being scared when he left. I remember a flash from my dad's pickup truck

driving down the road and I know all those memories go together because I have talked about it with my dad. So, I am pretty confident all those memories go together and I remember feeling scared. (Reese)

- I remember being scared of my mom and feeling alone. (Reese)
- And I remember thinking she is going to find our tracks, she is going to find us here and we are going to get shot and then we are going to hell. And I would pray God please don't send me to Hell. (Reese)
- It was at that point I realized how angry I was. I didn't know it until then. I came to realization at that time that I was really angry. (Richard)

During the middle phases of emotionally forgiving their abusive parent, participants began sharing how their anger and fear evolved into empathy for their parent. They were able to see their circumstances from a different viewpoint which allowed them to extend grace toward their abuser.

- Here is someone who may not have the kind of relationship I have with my Lord and Savior and may not have that kind of lifestyle I had growing up with a really good father figure, parental figure, grandparents, and a really strong Christian mother who pushed me into that way. I feel like with those two dominos focusing on those pieces I have been able to really release my heart and open up to him and do these things with him now that I would have never been able to do as a child. (Jon)
- I saw a lot of people who went through similar stuff and heard their stories of why they did some of this stuff and started to see she [mom] really was

sick. It wasn't something that she intended to do out of being mean. It was something she did out of what she fell into. She was lured in. Whatever reason there was and she couldn't get out. (Claus)

- I think judging my mom's motives, best I can I think she really thought...she was competitive...I think she wanted to win against my dad... but I think a lot of it was that she realized she blew the first 12 years of these kids' lives and thought she could do better. (Reese)
- My dad saw and heard and had to experience it and he got beat and everything else. He saw all that and was very angry over what life had given him, I guess you would say. But anyway, that carried over to our relationship when we were younger. (Howard)
- You know, you have to put yourself in a man's shoes to understand stuff. And when you get to my age, you realize this stuff is not worth it. I loved my dad, you remember him as good ole dad, coaching us with football and stuff. The old stuff is gone. The bad stuff...just remember the good stuff. (Twain)
- He just started sobbing and I forgave him that instant. I saw he had suffered too. (Richard)
- I can get emotional thinking about him and seeing how broken he was and put myself in his shoes. I tried to imagine how he felt. So, I knew he had a lot of regret and maybe that helped me forgive him because I could see I

wasn't the only one who suffered pain here. He suffered pain too.

(Richard)

Once participants were able to empathize with their abusive parent, they expressed really being able to focus on their emotional forgiveness. This led to feelings of relief.

- I had the feeling of relief to let it go because I couldn't do anything with it. It was just eating me up. To accept I really did nothing to cause this.

(Claus)

- I think the main thing was the relief. Knowing I don't have to live with this anymore. I'm not ever going to forget it and maybe it is good that I don't. But I don't have to let it affect the rest of my life. (Claus)
- It may sound selfish but I wanted to get that burden off. I wanted it to not hound me. It wasn't helping me at all. (Claus)

### **Substance abuse**

A prominent theme from the participants was the significant presence of substance use in their abusive parent's life. Most recalled experiences of their parent being intoxicated; however, others described memories of their parent using other illicit drugs.

- I had ridden with my grandpa at the ranch driving his truck a couple of times, and he had gotten so intoxicated and verbally abusive just talking trash and I threatened to steal his keys and drive back as a 13-year-old.

(Jon)

- We were visiting him and he had taken us to a concert that was an outside venue and he had gotten completely plastered. And he forced my older sister and I into the car to drive us home even though we didn't want to. So, we called my mom from the backseat of the car saying he's drunk, he's going to kill us, he's almost gotten into three wrecks already... (Jon)
- So, I dropped in and I remember the walls were sticky and shambled and totally looked like a drug house... (Jon)
- I'd say he [dad] is a high functioning alcoholic. If he has a bottle it will have water and vodka in there. And I always suspected he had harder substances so one time I found the pill form of methamphetamine and illegal pain killers... One point, not me, one of my sisters found a syringe with blood in it so I assume he [dad] shoots up or one of his girlfriend's shot up stuff. (Jon)
- It just got the point where... I remember when I was in 5th grade she asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I told her just for her not to drink when my friends come over. She would promise that and would kept it. She would be just rolling drunk. (Claus)
- One night she was so drunk, she was walking around the kitchen and got her foot stuck under an appliance or cabinet or something and fell backwards and broke her foot. (Claus)
- My mom was a drunk for about 13-15 years. Just swallowed bottles and bottles of vodka. (Reese)

- It got really hard because my mom, when she drank she got violently abusive. (Reese)
- I can remember mom was really drunk. That was another time with the gun and we had run away from her. (Reese)
- Mom would be passed out in the house for days. I mean she would get up and swallow booze and pass out again. (Reese)
- Oh, yeah, you see dad was also a drinker. I don't think he stopped until he was in his early 50's. (Twain)

### **Cognitive distortions**

Participants struggled with shame and believing a distorted reality that the abuse was their fault. Participants confess how these distortions manifested in their lives during their journey of emotional forgiveness. Throughout the participants' journey to emotionally forgive, their thoughts and feelings about both themselves and their abuser shifted from shame and blame to empathy and compassion. It was through this shift that emotional forgiveness was able to take place. Without that shift in their thinking, emotional forgiveness would not have been possible.

- To catch up with what was lost or didn't have, back when I needed it. And that's why I got so much into him. Following this sort of incident and being jealous for my friends. So, that's why I kind of dived into this relationship. I needed it. It was my fault. (Alex)
- He made me believe that I needed to prove myself worthy of his attention. (Alex)

- I was so ashamed that I missed something. (Alex)
- I'm so embarrassed that a grown-up man with family and responsibilities almost lost my family because of these events. I blame myself.
- I should be so stupid and reckless I guess. (Alex)
- If I were to fall into feelings again or excuses and have the same type of anger or the same line of feelings, I will screw up again. This thing really haunts me my entire life. I trust people too much. With dad, that was the worst case. The worst case ever. (Alex)
- That was my fault. (Alex)
- I fell to feelings and got to close, got them to close to myself. (Alex)

### **Making meaning of the abuse**

Survivors of abuse often wonder why this happened to them. Making meaning of abuse or any other traumatic event is critical to the healing process of the survivor. Participants shared how they were able to derive meaning from their horrible experiences of abuse. One expression of meaning was taking ownership in one's actions.

- This group is angry about this reason and that group is angry for that reason... everyone is angry now and no one is taking responsibility for their emotions. That was another thing I realized. I am responsible for my own emotions. I can't shift the blame. It was my job to deal with it, no one else's. (Richard)
- Most people, and it may be crass to compare people to a hog but people like to wallow and feel victimized... It's never my fault... If I could do

one thing to empower people it would make them realize they are in control of their own emotions and they are responsible for them. (Richard)

- So, the three years, it was brutal. It was a test. The things we had done to get to that point, we had to get our lives straightened out and in so doing that and working towards that goal, it was tough. (Howard)
- Like I said you are responsible not just for your life, but you have responsibilities for kids, family to take care of. (Alex)
- But then he [dad] asked me and Sue in his office and he was like, why were you doing this? Do you think I'm lying to you? Do you think I'm using this money somewhere else? I am a wealthy man who made himself a millionaire. Where were you asking these questions? How dare you. (Alex)
- I started asking questions to Sue and the things she told me... she probably didn't know it or he [dad] didn't tell her. Or maybe he forgot something, but that's when I got this suspicious feeling that things aren't matching up. That's when I followed up and started paying attention. I knew it was all hypocrisy. (Alex)
- I missed this type of relationship my entire life. I can't imagine what kind of conditions and environment would need to be around me to not have this sort of hunger for this type of father and son relationship. And that's where I lost attention ... Where I was blindly following. (Alex)



Another expression of meaning was participants sharing their experiences of having consequences with their abusive parent. They were all attuned to the reality that something terrible had happened to them, had grown to a place where they were able to extend emotional forgiveness; however, were not going to allow the abusive parent to continue the same abusive treatment moving forward.

- I've given him topics that we can discuss. I have lots of brothers and sisters and I was noticing that he would put me in the middle of any dispute he was having with someone else. I told him he can talk to me about me or my family. You can talk to me about politics or religion. You can talk to me about finances and that sort of stuff. But I will not talk to you about other family members and kind of set that ground work for him. And then when we had our kid, I had to set that ground work with him. Since he uses substances, I had to tell him you will not drive with them, you will not be alone with them. I just had to be frank with him. I said you can love on them and we will be around, but you are not going to have those other opportunities. It would be really sad if we lost that but we have to live within this range here because you could hurt your grandchild and that is unacceptable. (Jon)
- That's why the really hard guidelines and honesty has really helped the relationship. (Jon)
- I think where I also became ok is I realized I could forgive and let go of all those pieces but that does not mean I forget by any means. That doesn't

mean I start playing stupid. But being very cognizant of that but in a real way and not in a fake way. (Jon)

- Well I won't be totally done with them I just won't trust them anymore. That is the best I can do. If I don't trust you I won't turn my back on you. (Claus)
- And that is one of the things from my understanding of reading the Bible is that God commands us to forgive but he doesn't say you have to keep putting yourself in situations and I chose to stop putting myself in those situations. I have family; uncle, cousins, and they are still living that kind of lifestyle of hitting the bars. They beat their wives. I haven't seen them in 30 years. I don't have any hard feelings against them but I don't want to visit them either. I just don't want to be around that. And that is the way I was with him. That was the easiest thing to do. (Richard)
- What is forgiveness, you can do that to me again and I'm thinking yeah, no way. You can forgive a loan of someone not paying you back and not want to loan the money to the same person again. (Alex)
- And him [dad] trying to pull another string. But that didn't work. And it was so obvious to me that after everything he'd done. That's what I started to feel so uninvited because the person who'd done all that to me doesn't even realize the consequences and my feeling towards him. (Alex)

### **Effects of emotional abuse**

Another theme expressed was the powerful effects of emotional abuse compared to other forms of abuse. Physical and sexual abuse get a lot of attention because it is more noticeable; however, the participants expressed the damage caused by the emotional abuse could not be matched by other forms of abuse they experienced.

- Specifically, times when he said he would show up for something and then didn't show up for things. I just remember those being really crushing... So, I remember that at graduation and other sporting events that he said he'd show up and didn't and had all the excuses in the world for why. There was always a reason why in his book. (Jon)
- You always want to look good and do good and when you look up at your practices or games and he is not there especially when he's said he was going to be. When looking back, I think that was really tough. (Jon)
- One Christmas he just randomly showed up, like literally walked in the back door and walked in with a saga genesis and realized we didn't have a TV to hook it up to. So, it was like, "Thanks dad..." "We can't play with it..." It was things like that that he was completely neglectful. Each of us before they divorced, each of us kids had a college account that we could grow into but he actually left when my youngest sisters, they are twins, so they never got a college account established. When it came time to college, he said there was no money as opposed to the rest of us we all had

money to go to college, he said, “nope, there’s no money... take out your loans...” So, it was just things like that that he didn’t provide for. (Jon)

- He was trying to pull the same string again. Bringing up “health issues” and saying yeah, I might not see you again. (Alex)
- Until you’re out of it you go, “Whoa, that was bad...” I’d rather get hit. That pain goes away but the emotional doesn’t. Yeah, you don’t ever forget it. If two guys get into a fight, that’s it and it’s over. They will be laughing about it a year later. You don’t constantly think about that fight being horrible. Like the other kind. It will wane in its importance later but it is not like a pain of physical abuse or being hit. (Claus)
- I was born and no permanent teeth grew under my baby teeth and he would sometimes call me a toothless no good bastard and that will tear your guts out being called stuff like that. That’s the main thing... just calling me the horrible nasty names. (Twain)
- Verbal, that is what hurt me more. After getting your ass whipped, that goes away after a little while. The verbal you can’t forget it. (Twain)
- My family was originally from Indiana and he had moved us down to Florida right after he and my mother married. So, there was no family to be accountable to and abusers do that...they isolate their victims. (Richard)
- The worst things I remember were more emotional verbal type of abuse. And you know the Bible says a wound will heal but the sharp words,

emotional abuse, the pain from that can last a lifetime. I think that is what I carried with me more than the physical abuse was the emotional abuse because that is what it evolved to by the time I moved out. (Richard)

### **Forgiving because Christ first forgave me**

Participants expressed a lot about how their own salvation was an integral part in their ability to extend emotional forgiveness to their abusive parent. Reflecting on Christ's work on the cross and the grace that is extended to them on a daily basis humbled the participants.

- If they want to be obedient Christians, they have to forgive and if they are not Christians if they ever want healthy relationships with family and children they need to forgive because it spills over onto others. (Richard)
- He [grandfather] walked right along beside me during that time period so not only was he showing me grace and mercy but he was walking along side of me and I think that is just such a great picture of what we should be doing as well as Christians and as people who are constantly trying to forgive people around us that we are first walking with them in that relationship with them before that forgiveness can take place. I think the Lord's Prayer has a cadence to it along with a message to it so "Our Father who art in Heaven hallow be His name" so Holy is thy Father...Our kingdom come our will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven so please tell me what I can do I'm here on Earth, you've sent your son so tell me what to do. Give us this day our daily bread so thanks for the food and

providing for us and forgive us of our sins first so forgive me of all of my transgressions so all the things I have done wrong and out of that I can go out and forgive others who have sinned against me. So first forgive me so I can be in a place to forgive others. That is how Jesus taught us how to pray. (Jon)

- Go over and forgive. And churches tell you the same thing. Then you see other people forgiving, even small things. If you're not gonna let it go if you're not gonna go over it yourself or find peace with yourself, it's going to consume you from inside. (Alex)
- It says in the Bible, if you have a hard heart or you have something holding you back you can't get closer to God. That is very paraphrased and watered down... but that is what it is saying. If you have something that you are bitter about you won't be filling the Holy Spirit. You also can't walk on both sides of the fence. You can't walk with the Devil on one side and God on the other. (Claus)
- Every knee shall bow before the Father and I'll have to do it and she'll have to do that. I feel like it was my place to forgive her. It was for me. I needed to do that because I was told to Biblically. (Claus)
- We were talking about First John chapter one the 8th and 9th verses where if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins of all unrighteousness and my mom started to cry and said she wanted to pray and do this. So I said let's do it... We got down on our knees and I got to

hear my mom ask Jesus to forgive her of her sins. And there my mom was forgiven. (Reese)

- You know what Mary, I forgive you. And I can forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. (Reese)
- The first thing is you have to forgive. This is what Jesus says. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if don't forgive your brother from your heart. You have to forgive. You have to forgive it from the heart. You have to really mean it and let it go. The Greek word behind the English word forgiveness means to release, to let it go. You have to let go of the evil, bitterness and wrath and slander. You have to let it go from the heart. You have to mean it... Why wouldn't he forgive? The reason he wouldn't forgive is because he was thinking about what he was owed instead of the greatness he had been forgiven. (Reese)
- Show me someone who refuses to forgive and I will show you an arrogant person who refuses to reflect on the grace they have received in their own forgiveness. (Reese)
- The point is if you don't forgive, you don't get the Gospel. If you don't forgive you don't get the grace that is extended to you. (Reese)
- When you get oceans of grace from a Father you have sinned against every day, all day long... When you receive that, you have little teaspoons of forgiving grace you can afford to give to other people. Jesus is saying, if you can't forgive, you don't get your own forgiveness. (Reese)

- You know the Bible says if you're not willing to forgive I am not going to forgive you. Those were the kinds of things that were already there but after I became a Christian it just sealed it and it became cemented.  
(Howard)
- If you are a Christian and you are not willing to forgive, God will not forgive you. God says it, clear as day, if you are not willing to forgive God is not willing to forgive you. That is your obligation as a Christian to do for that person. (Howard)
- From what I understand, the Bible tells us we have to forgive everyone for everything so that is what I try to do. (Twain)
- That is when I joined a Bible class and started reading the Bible and it is always about forgiveness. There are places all throughout the Bible that talk about forgiveness and if you don't forgive, you won't get to see that Lord in Heaven. And that is something I really want to do. People ask me if I am a believer, and I say no, I am a knower. I know it happened. I truly believe and want to be there. It is something that I believe in and know to be true. (Twain)
- You come across the verse of scripture that says, "Forgive as you've been forgiven" and I started really thinking about forgiveness then. (Richard)
- You are never going to be the Christian you need to be if you are carrying around baggage like that. They need to forgive. If they want to be obedient Christians they have to forgive and if they are not Christians if they ever



want healthy relationships with family and children they need to forgive because it spills over onto others. (Richard)

### **God's grace**

The last theme that was pulled from the data was how participants discussed their inadequacy to forgive on their own. They shared how they experienced God's grace in their hearts to soften their responses to their abuser. This ultimately led to the extension of emotional forgiveness. This was evident in the participants softening as well as their reports of the hearts of their abusive parents softening.

- The expectation shouldn't be, let's get dinner but he is who he is and he's probably not going to show up. So, if does show up you can count that as a blessing. So you just reshape or reimage the expectations it really does in a way almost help the relationship because then you can think of those small moments you are having with him as blessings for a very, in my opinion, still a very sick and I think he just has issues in his own life... so I can view those gleams of hope as blessings. (Jon)
- I think how that extra piece or chamber of mine opened up and how not only God had to send his son to do that but he had to let it happen for these people who he has created yes, but are not His son, I think is the constant reminder of how we as humans can try and strive to work on these things all we want in an imperfect world in an imperfect way and really try our best and we are only able to do this through the grace He has given us in

our lives. That is the only way we can even start to have this conversation is because we were first given grace. (Jon)

- I don't want him to get hurt or I don't want him to have anything happen to him like that. I don't want that happening to him or anything bad happening to him because I'm not the way he is and I don't want to do anything similar. I'm not over him or better than him. That's why it's important to me to not be angry about what he had done. (Alex)
- I mean, I think she earned it [emotional forgiveness] by just the grace of God. (Claus)
- I feel very blessed that I did not grow up with him because of the small amounts of times he was there and was that poor example my gut and my experience of working with kids and what he is nowadays, him being around could have been a very negative impact in my life instead of the kind of man I am today. So, I actually feel blessed that they split up and he lived far away so I didn't have that direct impact in my daily life. It is hard to say that as a kid but looking back as an adult... (Jon)
- I had a pastor one time who had a member who was going through a lot of stuff in life and struggling with a lot of stuff and he said something along the lines if it wasn't for the sin in our lives this wouldn't be all messy and I shot back and said, it's because of the sin in our lives that we can realize we're messy and; therefore, we have to rely on our God. And I think that is such a true statement in my life as well. I have to realize the messiness I

had in my life growing up and the pain and all the stuff and the way my mom was treated and the things I think are unforgiveable are actually not mine to forgive. I don't have that power. It is up to me to continue to love those who want to be in my life and those who are in my life because He is the one who is going to forgive me for all of my wretchedness and everything else. (Jon)

- I met all of my friends and in the providence of God all of them were Christians. The 3-4 people that I wound up meeting initially and spending time with were Christians. So, I went to church... (Reese)
- We were asked to go and be alone and pray in the way we were talking about and I remember just thinking wow, God hears our prayers. How can he do that? How can he hear everyone's prayer? And just being overwhelmed by the bigness of a God who could do that and then reflecting on the fact that God has been hearing my prayer. That prayer that night on the campus of Morehead State University. Prayers running through the snow. Prayers staying up late laying on our waterbed. I can remember thinking God has been answering my prayers because I am not dead yet. I am not in Hell. It makes me want to keep praying that I won't go to Hell. Door opens up and Star walks in and sits down and asked me what I was thinking about and I told her some of what I've shared with y'all and she shared the Gospel with me. It was February 20, 1994 and she

shared the Gospel with me and I believed it. It was as simple as that.

(Reese)

- She [mom] softened a bit. It was still uncomfortable and weird at times and I would call with some irregularity and would go home and visit for holidays but it wasn't close by any stretch but softer than it had been.

(Reese)

- I think Sarah was the first person who made Jesus really winsome to her [mom]. We kept sharing the Gospel and trying to bring my mom to faith and as she continued to soften toward the Gospel it became evident that the Lord was working in her heart and she would ask questions and was interested and seeing that there was something different in the way we were living life and my brothers and their wives and ex-wives were living their lives. (Reese)
- And there just started to be this winsome aroma of Jesus with my mom and then I was in her living room one afternoon and we were talking about First John chapter one the 8th and 9th verses where if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins of all unrighteousness and my mom started to cry and said she wanted to pray and do this. So I said let's do it and I got to hear my mom ask Jesus to forgive her of her sins. And there my mom was forgiven. (Reese)
- She was a changed woman. She walked into my dad's living room who she mistreated for decades like he was the scum of the earth she walked

into his living room and said, “Tom, I am so sorry. I committed adultery. I made your life miserable. I kicked you out of our house on Christmas. And it was all my fault.” Her testimony was that he did not do anything wrong. He was a faithful, good man and didn’t deserve the woman he married and asked for his forgiveness. One of the most dramatic realities was that she called the wife of the man with whom she committed adultery so now it had been 2 and a half decades or so. This woman had hated my mom and her kids...oh my goodness. You can imagine. She hated my mother. Said awful words about her that were true. And my mom calls this woman. She says, “I wanted to ask your forgiveness for ruining your marriage.” Ultimately, she did leave her husband. She said I was hugely responsible for the end of your marriage and I am a Christian now and wanted to call you and ask you for your forgiveness. This woman said you know what, I forgive you. And I can forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. (Reese)

- This is probably the 8th time I’ve told this story, and each time I can’t believe the exploding grace of Jesus’ forgiveness in all of these people’s lives. (Reese)
- About four years after all that happened, my mom walked with the Lord. She found a church. She would call me up and she would have questions about the Bible. Questions about how to pray. Theological questions that would just blow your mind. I am sitting there as a minister of the Gospel

and just thinking about the last 13 years how my mom has been hating on Jesus and now is calling me up asking questions about faith whether the preacher preached a biblical sermon that day. She'd call me up and say, I don't think this was Biblical and I'd say, "Mom that is not Biblical." She was the real deal. (Reese)

- I was able to talk to her and ask her, "Mom you trust Jesus don't you?" and she said, "Yeah, I trust Jesus." I told her, "Jesus is going to take care of you. Jesus is going to have you in this." She asked me to read the Bible to her and I read second Corinthians 4 and 5 and it was just uh, it was the last conversation I had with her. It was unbelievably precious that this woman who had tried to kill me 3-4 occasions, hated Jesus, hated me, and the last earthly conversation I had with this woman was second Corinthians. (Reese)
- The most defining reality of who we are is not the bad things that happen to us. But are the bad things I have done that Jesus forgave. I am not an abused little boy who grew up. I am a sinner who Jesus saved. And if you are a Christian, that is the defining reality about you too. (Reese)
- Whenever, I got arrested for my second DWI and I got into that cop car August 26, 2000 I gave my life to Christ. I thought I was a Christian before but I was kidding myself and I committed my life to Christ at that time. He had been working on my heart for a while. (Howard)

- When I started doing what I needed to do to become a pastor, you could see the changes and specifically you could see the changes when I became the pastor at Brazos River Baptist church. The changes were obvious. The conversations we had like the last one we had two weeks before he died, I mean there was no question in my heart that my dad was a Christian. On that day, August 26, 2000, that is when my relationship changed with everybody. (Howard)
- Don't get me wrong, I sometimes would have to diffuse situations that were going on but at that point I was able to do that and my dad was receptive to it instead of resistant so that was a blessing right there to be able to do that with my dad. (Howard)
- It was the hardest time of our life but spiritually speaking it was the most fulfilling than any other time I can point to walking through that and God blessing us through that. God just pouring out his blessings on us. Looking back on all that its cool to see how God brought us through it. (Howard)
- More than anything seeing God's faithfulness through all of it. And more than anything else, I see that. I see how we got through it. I see how we got from point A to point B and beyond. It is pretty wild. That would be it more than anything else, God's faithfulness through everything we dealt with. Every single one of God's promises is true. God can change your life if you let Him. (Howard)

- When God forgives you he says he throws it as far as the East is from the West and so I let it go and it was over with as far as I was concerned it was all gone then. So I forgave him then and hadn't thought about anything like that. I never get mad about things that used to happen and stuff. When I forgave him I forgave him that is it. I forget it. (Twain)
- One of the men who spoke at his memorial was a man he had spoke to about Jesus and he came to know the Lord. I thought that was crazier than ever. As crazy as my dad was and to think he was going to talk to people about Jesus, I didn't think it was in my dad. God can change anybody's heart. I totally believe that. (Twain)
- I said I thought God had given me some kind of insight? A lot of boys grow up and want to be like their dad. All my memories growing up I thought, "I do not want to be like my dad, I do not want to be like my dad..." That was like a mantra for me. (Richard)
- Once I started dealing with myself and the Lord was dealing with me too from a point of honesty, things slowly started getting better. There was no magic moment when I was like, "whoa, the pain is suddenly gone..." I mean it was a process but when I looked back on it I was like "wow, the pain is gone... and I have forgiven". This was a several year process. (Richard)
- If God can change that monster, if the Gospel can do that to that monster, I mean I'm on fire for the Gospel. (Richard)



- I don't buy the "I can't forgive" ... God's given us all the grace to forgive so I just don't buy it. (Richard)

### **Summary**

In summary, the eight themes ("coping"; "evolution of emotions"; "substance abuse"; "making meaning of the abuse"; "cognitive distortions"; "effects of emotional abuse"; "forgiving because Christ first forgave me"; and "God's grace") emerged as common shared meaning in the men's lived experience of emotionally forgiving their abusive parent. These men were eloquent about their unique and distressed family histories, the love they had for their parents, and the heartbreak of seeing and living the abuse at the hands of their loved ones. All participants shared a deep experience of pain, love, hope, and duty.

The theme "coping" represents how participants chose to handle the abusive relationship. Their experiences illustrate a progression from avoidance to using scripture to numb their pain. Experiences were shared of defense mechanisms learned to shut off emotion and having rigid boundaries. Others were shared of how humanizing their abusive parent helped them to cope with some of the terrible things they had experienced at the hand and mouth of their parent.

"Evolution of emotions" included participants' stories of how their emotions were constantly changing. The emotional and physical toll shared by participants included anger, hatred, confusion, fear, guilt, empathy, and hurt. It is easy to mislabel emotions as secondary emotions such as anger. However, through reflection and growth, the

participants shared common experiences of how they came to realize what they were feeling was more complex than just anger.

The theme “substance abuse” represented the experiences of having a parent who suffered from addiction and how that addiction led to cruel and unimaginable behavior. One participant shared of his pleading with his mom to stop drinking so he can have a playdate at his house while another participant shared of his mom shooting a gun at him while intoxicated. These experiences highlight the significant toll substances can have on one’s judgment and the danger one can be in when these substances are abused.

The fourth theme, “cognitive distortions”, illuminated the false reality the participants had to grapple with in their journey of emotional forgiveness. The participants shared of their false beliefs of believing the abuse was their fault. Another participant shared of his embarrassment for not realizing the relationship was abusive faster. Others discussed questioning what made them bad enough to deserve this abuse.

The theme “making meaning of the abuse” expresses the participants journey to understand and find sense in their experiences with their abusive parent. In all trauma work, this is a critical step in healing. These participants were able to process their pain and suffering by working through their experiences and ultimately concluding that the abuse was not about them.

“Effects of emotional abuse” brought focus to the participants overwhelming belief that emotional abuse was far more difficult to heal from than other forms of abuse. The participants were able to share that their experiences of emotional abuse affected them deeper and more permanently than any of the physical beatings. One participant

expressed his emotional abuse as “ripping his insides out” whereas the busted lip or bruised eye would heal in a few days.

“Forgiving because Christ first forgave me” illuminated the weight of meeting the expectation set forth first by God. The participants shared of how logically knowing this was the expectation helped prepare them emotionally to extend the same grace to their abusive parent. This was a resounding theme pulled from the participants’ experiences and was one of the most influential components in emotionally forgiving their abusive parent.

The final theme, “God’s grace”, drew attention to how the participants shared their weakness in their own humanity; however, were able to pull strength from God’s mightiness. Participants shared how they were only able to give grace because they first received grace. Each participant shared experiences of how they witnessed God’s grace working to soften their abusive parent’s heart or in their own heart. Participants continued to give the credit for their ability to extend emotional forgiveness to their abusive parent to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This chapter summarized the results of a phenomenological study based on the individual interviews of 7 adult men who had emotionally forgiven their abusive parent. The adult men participants were interviewed with the research question: What are the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving your abusive parent? The phenomenological approach permitted me to ask open-ended questions to obtain information about the participants’ lived experiences. From the participants’ responses I revealed statements

that connected their experiences to the phenomena of emotionally forgiving abusive parents.

The results revealed commonalities among the participants. Several themes emerged, including coping; evolution of emotions; substance abuse; cognitive distortions; making meaning of the abuse; effects of emotional abuse; forgiving because Christ first forgave me; and God's grace. The participants experienced a multitude of emotions, including anger, hatred, relief, confusion, fear, empathy, hurt, and guilt. Though it was difficult for the participants to endure such treatment, it is notable that impacting each theme was their faithfulness in being obedient to God's command to forgive.

Chapter 5 will report conclusions drawn from the analysis of data presented in this chapter. The results of this study indicate implications for social change, recommendations for future research, and will be detailed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

My purpose in this study was to explore the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. I selected a phenomenological approach in effort to explore and comprehend the experience of adult men going through the process of emotionally forgiving their abusive parent. This form of analysis allowed participants to recount rich narratives of their everyday lives.

A researcher-designed semistructured interview guide permitted open and free discussion while concentrating the specific aspects of the research question:

1. What are the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents?

I transcribed and coded audio recordings of the interviews during the analysis process. I assembled the codes into categories, from which eight themes developed. The first of the eight emerging themes, “coping,” depicted how participants chose to navigate the abusive relationship. Their experiences demonstrate a progression from avoiding their abuser both mentally and physically to meditating on scripture to heal their pain. Experiences were shared of various defense mechanisms learned from detaching emotionally to having rigid boundaries. Others were shared of how humanizing their abusive parent helped them to cope with some of the terrible things they had experienced at the hand and mouth of their parent.

“Evolution of emotions” integrated participants’ stories of how their emotions were continuously altering. The emotional and physical charge shared by participants included anger, hatred, confusion, fear, guilt, empathy, and hurt. It is easy to mislabel

emotions such as anger. However, through reflection and growth, the participants shared common experiences of how they came to realize what they were feeling was more complex than just anger and deeper rooted.

The theme “substance abuse” captured experiences of having a parent who suffered from addiction and how that addiction led to brutal and inconceivable behavior. These experiences highlight the significant toll substances can have on one’s judgment and the danger one can be in when these substances are abused.

The fourth theme, “cognitive distortions,” brought forth the false reality the participants had to contend with in their journey of emotional forgiveness. The participants shared their negative beliefs of thinking the abuse was their fault. Another participant shared of his embarrassment for not realizing the relationship was abusive faster by saying he should have known better. Others discussed questioning what made them bad enough to deserve this abuse. This later shifted toward cognitions of compassion and empathy.

The theme “making meaning of the abuse” illustrated the participants journey to comprehend and find sense in their experiences with their abusive parent. In trauma work, this is a critical step in healing. These participants were able to process their pain and suffering by working through their experiences and finding peace in the revelation that the abuse was not about them.

“Effects of emotional abuse” emerged as the participants expressed an overwhelming belief that emotional abuse was far more difficult to heal from than other forms of abuse. The participants were able to share that their experiences of emotional

abuse affected them harsher and more permanently than any of the physical beatings. One participant expressed his emotional abuse as “ripping his insides out,” whereas, the busted lip or bruised eye would heal in a few days.

“Forgiving because Christ first forgave me” surfaced from the weight of meeting the expectation set forth first by God. The participants shared of how logically knowing this was the expectation helped reconcile their emotional hesitancy and extend the same grace to their abusive parent.

The final theme, “God’s grace,” was drawn from the data by how the participants shared their limitations in their own humanity but were able to pull strength from God’s power. Participants shared how they were only able to give grace because they first received grace. Each participant shared experiences of how they witnessed God’s grace working to soften their abusive parent’s heart or in their own heart. Participants continued to give the credit for their ability to extend emotional forgiveness to their abusive parent to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Results from the data analysis divulged the complexity and intensity of the obstacles faced when working towards emotionally forgiving an abusive parent. Particularly the adult male’s progress in healing both emotionally and mentally from the abuse subjected to them by their parents. There were no discrepant cases in this study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The results of this study exposed strong reliability with many concepts of Everett Worthington’s REACH forgiveness model (2014) and Bowen’s (2004) family systems

theory. These two theories allowed for the study emotional forgiveness in the context of the parent-child dyad within the family unit.

The REACH forgiveness model provided the foundation for understanding the specific and necessary steps an individual can take to accomplish emotional forgiveness. This allowed for clarity when differentiating emotional forgiveness from one's act to choose to forgive a transgressor. (Worthington et al., 2010). However, this model provides the end result of emotional forgiveness, how one accomplishes each step and ultimately arrives at emotionally forgiving their abusive parent can look unique to each individual. When there are disruptions in families due to abuse, a range of intense emotions can present lifelong consequences for children (Henderson et al., 2009; Hess, 1999; Poehlmann, 2003; Scarcella et al., 2003).

The findings of this study were consistent with opinions of the REACH forgiveness model. When one experiences an abusive act by their parent, it can be very difficult to make sense of the adverse experience. When we cannot make sense of an experience, it tends to negatively impact our well-being. REACH allows individuals to recall an event in their life when they caused someone else harm. This recognition can give meaning and make sense of their abusive experience. It allows the individual to empathize with the abuser and arrive at a place both emotionally and logically where they are able to extend emotional forgiveness to their abuser. Recognizing the significance of the parent-child relationship to well-adjusted adulthood, the adults in this study focused on their own healing rather than their animosity toward their offender.



The results of this study pertained to emotionally forgiving relationships within the family, and were consistent with Bowen's (2004) family systems theory, which suggests that in the family context individual behavior is best comprehended due to the rules and roles that sustain behavior patterns. Bowen (2004) posited that the behavior of individual members of a family influences the behavior of others within the family system. Differentiation of individual family members affects their functioning within the family, and, in opposition, the family system affects the differentiation of individual members of the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The degree of differentiation of an individual family member determines the functionality with which that member interacts within the family. The highly differentiated individual can develop close relationships within the family, while retaining their own identity outside the family.

#### **Limitation of the Study**

Transferability, the degree to which results can be understood by the reader as relevant and meaningful, is one standard by which qualitative studies are assessed (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). As the researcher, I cannot assume generalization to the broader population due to the samples in qualitative research being small. In an effort to maximize transferability, the research delivered exhaustive contextual descriptions believed to be of significance to the reader's comprehension. Furthermore, I continued interviewing participants until saturation of codes and themes was achieved (Guest et al., 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative methodological literature suggests that between six and 10 participants is a reasonable estimate (Morse, 2000), and

I was able to reach saturation within that estimate. I noted in the data analysis process when no new concepts or themes were identified.

A researcher-designed interview guide with questions influenced by peer-reviewed literature and feedback from methodological experts prohibited leading questions that had potential to distort or influence results. I reviewed pertinent literature and consulted with colleagues to increase familiarity of the abused adult child culture. Due to participants' opportunity to refuse participation and terminate the interview at any time, it is assumed they shared accurately and openly. I provided each of the participants with an interview summary, and requested for them to participate in a member checking process to ensure their experiences were accurately captured (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). In some cases, the participants disclosed experiences extending over multiple years. The study is restricted by the participants' capacity to accurately recall and express their experiences.

I addressed the matter of dependability with a detailed, thorough account of the research procedures (Shenton, 2004). An exhaustive explanation will provide the reader with a full understanding of the research process, and future researchers will be equipped to replicate the study. I described the research design plan and execution, including data collection and analysis. To ensure confirmability, I kept an ongoing reflective journal to document the research process, as well as considerations regarding research decisions.

The research results were potentially limited by the capacity of participants to correctly remember and share their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). I strived to recognize and cast away personal beliefs using a process known as bracketing

(Creswell, 2007). Any preconceived notions about the research question that I was unable to cast away would have stood as a possible limitation to the study.

As previously stated, member checking involves the participants reviewing their transcribed responses to guarantee their experiences have been accurately captured (Shenton, 2003). I gave participants their interview summaries and asked that they validate accuracy to be sure the essence of intended meaning was accurately preserved. It is one of the most effective ways to defend against misunderstanding the participants' experiences (Gelling, 2010). The elapsed time between the data collection and member checking could have potentially posed a limitation if participants' perceptions of the experience evolved over time.

Participants were limited to respondents to participation invitations distributed by my professional colleagues, and volunteers after learning of the study from others through the snowball sampling method (Patton, 2002), where participants or informed individuals told other potential participants about the study.

### **Recommendations**

Interviews with the participants exposed shared positive qualities, such as commitment to their emotional forgiveness of their abusive parent; desire to be obedient to God, determination to persist, and a strong sense of responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing of their families. They also shared heavy and intense emotions during the emotional forgiveness process, including fear, frustration, and emotional exhaustion. To cope with various obstacles, the participants sought out religious affiliations and support,

counselors, other professionals and support groups, and they established healthy boundaries with their repentant parent.

The adult men participants acknowledged significant challenges in their efforts to facilitate relationship reconciliation through emotional forgiveness with their parent. Further research is recommended. For instance, studies with a focus on religion's influence on emotional forgiveness and how religions other than western religion encourage forgiveness and how that experience differs from protestant individuals. Other relationships could also be examined to increase one's understanding of this phenomenon such as the lived experiences of emotionally forgiving parents who engage in domestic violence or abuse the participant's siblings. Potentially valuable information could be gleaned from replicating this study through the perception of the young child's lived experience, using research questions similar to those in this study, but with a focus on the experience as a child instead of the adult's recollection of the childhood experience.

It is also recommended that quantitative studies of emotional forgiveness be considered, to determine at an cumulative level the duration and extent of secondary trauma across generations (e.g., Figley, 1995). Initial studies suggest that trauma across multiple generations can disturb those who were not directly subjected to the originating event affecting both emotional and physical well-being (Lev-Wiesel, 2007). This area of research could be specifically important for the children and grandchildren of the survivors of abusive parents, harboring the challenges of their childhood experiences with them as they age.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The findings of this phenomenological study have the potential to foster positive social change through the understandings gleaned about emotional forgiveness in the parent-child dyad. Themes in this study revealed that the adult men were challenged with humbling themselves to forgive their abusive parent regardless of whether the abusive parent repented for their abusive treatment. These challenges often led to an increase in strain, stress, emotional and physical exhaustion, further challenging this familial dyad's coping and tolerance. Significant concerns for their individual physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing presents therapy implications for the adult men. Psychotherapists treating abuse survivors both in individual and family therapy may want to modify treatment plans based on areas the participants acknowledged as most traumatic and challenging. Findings showed that the adult men valued healthy communication in their relationships with their parents, including speaking respectfully about their role in the relationship. Shifts were presented in the adult men's journey to emotionally forgive from focusing on what is due them to what grace has given them. Support groups and therapists for traumatized adult children may want to encourage healthy communication skills for adult children and their parents working towards emotional forgiveness and reconciliation. Counseling and support groups geared to adult survivors of parental abuse, their siblings, and their parents, may increase their understanding of the family system and how the unresolved transgression can affect the entire family, and implement insight gained from this study.

Positive social change in emotionally forgiving abusive parents is dependent upon disbursing results through avenues that will reach them. I intend to distribute the results of this study with local mental health agencies, churches, and various universities. In addition, I plan to present findings to each participant.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Therapists working with trauma and abuse survivors potentially will be interested in the results of this study. Findings postulate that the emotional forgiveness experience often is characterized by healing and the ability to remember the abuse without having to relive it. This data is beneficial to therapists when acquiring a thorough history during intake; setting appropriate therapy goals; and treatment planning for treating trauma, anxiety, depression, and grief as a result of unhealthy family dynamics. Given the importance the participants gave to being obedient to Christ, these findings could be most impactful in treatment planning for licensed counselors practicing in the church setting. Even therapists specializing in substance abuse and recovery could potentially benefit from the results in creating therapeutic needs for the client and family system as substance abuse is often comorbid with other Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) disorders seen in abuse survivors.

### **Conclusion**

Emotional forgiveness has been determined as a critical component for emotional, physical, and mental well-being. With the increase of reported abuse, this topic has become more and more relevant and personal to our culture in the US. The well-being and healthy psychological development of the abuse survivors depend upon successfully

emotionally forgiving their abusive parent. The immediate and long-term welfare of adult children who often present with trauma symptoms in abusive families is of utmost concern, with the reconciliation through emotional forgiveness of the parent-child relationship within the family as vital.

Minimal quantitative studies have examined variables of forgiveness and even fewer qualitative studies have explored the experiences of forgiveness. Examples of such studies included Fow (1998), Halling (2006), and Rowe (1989) who explored the lived experiences of forgiveness. Halling (1994) studied the phenomenology of shame and its influence on forgiveness, and Ferch (2000) shared findings of the lived experiences of touch and its role in forgiveness. Many other researchers such as Baver et al. (1992) have explored self-forgiveness.

In this phenomenological study I addressed a gap in the literature with regard to the lived experience of emotional forgiving abusive parents. I was guided by similar research conducted of women's lived experiences who emotionally forgive and addressed the gender gap by examining specifically men's lived experiences of emotionally forgiving abusive parents. Understanding the associated trauma when the abuse is not properly processed, as well as healthy functioning in the parent-child dyad was germane to this study. The themes emerging from this study related to the lived experience of the adult men who survived abuse from their parent. The themes, coping; evolution of emotions; substance abuse; cognitive distortions; making meaning out of the abuse; effects of emotional abuse; forgiving because Christ first forgave me; and God's grace, were experiences common to the adult men. The participants honestly shared their depth

of love and sorrow for their parent and the extremes of emotions they experienced on a daily basis. The information received from the interviews provided insight into their lived experiences that may be useful to professionals who work with survivors of abuse and family dynamics. Most captivating was the finding that God's grace was key to every aspect of the emotional forgiveness process. Future studies in this area may provide additional information and add to a balanced understanding of emotional forgiveness in families who have struggled with abuse.



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## Appendix A: List of Codes

Dissociation	Alcohol
Denial	Prescription pills
Avoidance	I deserved it
Substance abuse	I am a bad person
Eating disorder	I am unlovable
Justified	I should have known
Relief	I am stupid (not smart enough)
Anger	I am worthless
Hatred	I am not good enough
Confusion	I should have done something
Shaming	Consequences
Fear	Responsibility
Guilty	Self-preservation
Empathy	Empathizing with the abuser
Hurt	Anxious
Lonely	Obligation
Exhausted	Cognitive reframes
More long term	Sanctification
Harder to overcome	
Most damaging	