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Article

On the possibility of forgiveness in child sexual abuse

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ABSTRACT

Whether or not it is appropriate to offer victims the possibility of working on forgiveness to overcome the pain of the lived experience and its consequences is a controversial issue. The pressure to forgive makes revictimization more likely and transmits guilt and a message of minimizing the victims' pain. A misunderstanding of forgiveness can further weaken the victim's ability to protect him- or herself, make him or her more vulnerable, and make it easier for the abuse to continue. This paper aims to review the conditions for forgiveness to be a psychological tool for the mental health of the victims. Forgiveness is a complex concept with multiple dimensions and possibilities, and it can offer victims a valuable resource for overcoming their pain. However, it is not essential to the victim's healing process.

Sobre la posibilidad de perdón en el abuso sexual infantil

Palabras clave
Perdón
Abuso sexual infantil
Reconciliación

RESUMEN

La conveniencia o no de plantear a las víctimas la posibilidad de trabajar sobre el perdón como forma de superar el dolor de la experiencia vivida y sus consecuencias es una cuestión controvertida. Las dinámicas de presión hacia el perdón hacen más probable la revictimización y transmiten tanto culpa como un mensaje de minimización de su dolor. Un perdón mal entendido puede debilitar aún más la capacidad de protegerse de la víctima, hacerla más vulnerable y facilitar la prolongación del abuso. El objetivo de este artículo es revisar las condiciones para que el perdón sea una herramienta psicológica al servicio de la salud mental de las víctimas. El perdón es un concepto complejo, con múltiples dimensiones y posibilidades, y puede ofrecer a las víctimas un valioso recurso para superar su dolor, aunque no es esencial para el proceso de sanación de una víctima.

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The reality of child sexual abuse (CSA) poses important challenges for psychologists. One of them is whether or not to offer victims the possibility of working on forgiveness as a way of overcoming the pain of the experience and its consequences.

This is an issue that has generated quite a bit of academic discussion. Even the mere fact of raising the possibility of forgiveness in CSA is controversial in itself. Some authors point out that child sexual abuse represents "absolute evil" and therefore implies absolute unforgiveness, arguing that "monstrous acts create monstrous actors who have no right to forgiveness" (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017, p. 3). Other authors, however, find that forgiveness can be liberating and healing for victims (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Tracy, 1999; Walton, 2005).

The authors that are against even raising the possibility of forgiveness, focus on: 1) experiences in which forgiveness has been imposed, transmitting to the victim the obligation to forgive, 2) experiences in which forgiveness has been used as a form of manipulation, and 3) the vindication of the role of revenge and resentment in the psychology of the victim.

Firstly, forgiveness has often been presented to victims as an unquestionable moral obligation. The pressure to forgive has sometimes come from companions or spiritual leaders, showing great ignorance of the dynamics of sexual abuse, which can lead to further harm to survivors of abuse. At other times, the pressure to forgive comes from the community, which expects the victim to put "things back the way they were," thus putting a double pressure on the victim: now he or she must also bear the burden of being responsible for the welfare of the community. This facilitates the expression of "false forgiveness" which weakens true forgiveness. Premature pressure to forgive sexual abusers not only hinders recovery and facilitates the repression of pain and anger, but also contributes to abuse in the community, as it promotes the minimization or denial of the full extent of the harm and frees the abuser from true responsibility, from confronting his or her behavior and the need for change (Casey, 1998).

Secondly, the pressure to forgive may come from the abuser him- or herself, which leads to the analysis of forgiveness as manipulation. Forgiveness has often been used by abusers as a way of guaranteeing the victim's silence (Casey, 1998). The offender's apologies are not definite indicators of repentance; in fact, they sometimes serve to deny their problem and convince themselves that they are good people. Sexual abusers are often adept at manipulation and may use apologies to justify the abuse to themselves and others, and to maintain control; by apologizing they may be seeking to minimize the abuse and be relieved of guilt, gain sympathy from others, or reduce a sentence (Casey, 1998). In all these cases, the goal is to maintain power and create a scenario that facilitates reabuse. In addition, asking for forgiveness in CSA cases is generally inappropriate; the simple act of asking for it is in itself reabuse: it is treating the victim as someone special, the only one who can help them with their problem, as their savior, asking them to do something they do not want to do, which puts the victim back in a difficult, destructive position (Walton, 2005). These dynamics of pressure on the abused individual make revictimization more likely. It is iatrogenic to force or pressurize a victim to forgive, as it conveys both guilt and a message of minimizing their pain." Any therapeutic approach that insists on the need for forgiveness has time and again fallen into the trap of denying the child the space to show childhood pain (...) it is an attempt to close the wound before cleaning or healing it" (Casey, 1998, p. 229). In addition, premature forgiveness may contribute to perpetuate the dynamics of abuse and dependency; prolonged abuse in a relationship creates complex, coercive interactions between victim and abuser, combining violence and dependency (Lahav et al., 2019). It is not a relationship between equals; there is in every abusive relationship a power imbalance. A misunderstood forgiveness can further weaken the victim's ability to protect him- or herself, the less powerful party in the relationship, making him or her more vulnerable and facilitating the prolongation of the abuse.

Finally, this issue of the victim's debilitation leads to the analysis of the role of negative emotions in the victim's experience. Both negative feelings and thoughts as well as desires for avoidance and revenge towards the offender are part of the natural response after receiving severe harm (McCullough, 2008). This experience serves several functions in the psychology of the victim. First, negative feelings, in addition to being adaptive in the face of attacks or threats, have an alarm function, warning of danger, helping the person to mobilize to protect themselves (Lahav et al., 2019). That is, they serve the function of supporting personal protection. On the other hand, having resentment towards the abuser can be a healthy indicator of seeking justice and respect for the victim (Tracy, 1999). Revenge corresponds to the idea of "paying for what he did," of balancing the scales and restoring justice, of not allowing the consequences of his actions to be minimized for the other. Moreover, it is a way of restoring a sense of control and combating helplessness, so characteristic of victims of abuse; revenge (or planning revenge) involves moving from a passive to an active position, provides a sense of power and control, and avoids continuing to feel vulnerable. Finally, revenge is a way of conveying to the person who has hurt you that there are consequences for doing so, that hurting you is not "free", thus avoiding reabuse. For all these reasons, it is important to understand, accept, and validate this emotional experience of the victim. The victim should not be blamed for his or her feelings after the aggression; they are a natural way of responding. Nor should their elimination be rushed; only under strict conditions—especially ensuring respect for the victim—should attempts be made to move the process forward.

However, although negative feelings and revenge may provide these protective functions, maintained over the long term they have negative outcomes for physical and mental health (Ysseldyck et al., 2017). Specifically, Orth et al. (2006) show that the presence of feelings of revenge correlates with posttraumatic stress symptoms such as post-traumatic intrusion and hyperarousal, a correlation that increases as time elapses after the assault.

As can be seen, the approach to forgiveness in CSA is not simply an ethical, moral, or religious question (as it is often believed) but requires psychologists to carry out a serious and well-founded analysis of the psychological needs of the victim and the tools that psychology can offer to care for and improve his or her mental health and well-being. The aim of this article is to offer conceptual keys on forgiveness that can help professionals to decide whether or not to work on it in each case and to guide their possible intervention, if they decide to do so. In other words, we aim to understand in depth the concept and process of forgiveness so that the work on forgiveness becomes a psychological tool to serve the mental health of the victims and not to endanger or debilitate it.

Considering the Offense: Understanding the emotional experience of the CSA victim

The starting point when approaching any process of forgiveness and reconciliation is, necessarily, the consideration of the offense committed and the impact it has had on the victim. Only by understanding the life experience of the person who received the offense can we begin a path that may lead to forgiveness, but one that must certainly be traveled while attending to and caring for their needs, respecting their dignity, without minimizing the harm suffered and, above all, without causing them even more harm.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is defined on the basis of two major concepts (Pereda, 2010): coercion, i.e., the use of physical force, pressure, authority, threat, or deception, and age asymmetry, which makes a free decision by the child and a shared relationship between equals impossible. These criteria indicate that the impact of CSA does not stem only from the sexual acts themselves; in fact, there are many other sources of suffering during abuse. The usual process of approaching, grooming, and sexualization by the aggressor contributes to a state of great confusion in the child. This state of confusion (mental, moral, emotional) grows and increases in the following elements of the abuse process, excellently described in the model proposed by Summit (1983) known as child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome (CSASI): 1) secrecy; 2) helplessness; 3) entrapment and accommodation; 4) delayed, conflicting, and unconvincing disclosure; and 5) retraction.

Firstly, the initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, isolation, vulnerability, and guilt are dependent on one of the characteristics of child sexual abuse: it occurs only when the child is alone with the offender and is rarely shared with anyone. The secrecy in which everything takes place guides him/her to perceive that something bad and dangerous is happening. Most of the victims—when they are adults—admit that they did not tell anyone while it was happening. There are numerous reasons that lead the minor not to report the abuse when it is happening (Tamarit, et al., 2015): the feeling of guilt and shame, confusion about what is happening, the belief that it will be useless or that they will not be believed, the lack of evidence, the feeling that the abuse situation is an intimate and personal matter or the fear of a negative reaction and retaliation from the aggressor or the family environment, the bond with the abuser, the fear of being ostracized by the group reaction, avoiding shame in the family, repression of the memory or the negative experience in previous disclosures during childhood. The experience of secrecy during and after the abuse will promote the emergence of a strong sense of guilt in the victim.

Secondly, in child sexual abuse there is a situation of inequality that distorts any possibility of a freely consensual relationship; what defines abuse is, fundamentally, the asymmetry between those involved in the relationship, the inequality of power, and the presence of coercion—explicit or implicit. It is not a relationship between equals (Intebi, 2007). Due to the basic subordination and defenselessness in which children find themselves within authoritarian bonds, it is very difficult for them to protect themselves. Although abusers assume that if the victim does not complain she/he is consenting to the relationship, the reality is that children do not react in the same way as adult victims: they do not resist using physical force, they do not scream for help, and they do not try to escape. In most cases, minors have had no alternative but to surrender submissively and maintain secrecy. The fact that the aggressor is often part of a bond of trust and is in a position of affect only increases the imbalance of power and the degree of helplessness in which the victim finds him- or herself. Although non-resistance does not make them accomplices, they will come to believe that this is the case and this, together with the maintenance of secrecy, will feed that large core of guilt and self-reproach; they end up judging their behavior as a minor by adult behavioral criteria.

Thirdly, many victims report—later, as adults—that they felt trapped and increasingly powerless as the abuse continued. Some reported being aware of a kind of bonding with the abuser that, of course, further confounded the problem by increasing the ambivalence and guilt. A frequent characteristic of CSA victims is moral confusion, difficulty in distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil; the abusing adult conveys their justifications, distortions, and reinterpretations of what is happening at a time when the child is not yet cognitively or morally mature enough to question them. The only possibility to stop an abusive situation is for the victim to seek protection and for an immediate intervention to take place. If none of this happens, the option left is to learn to accept the situation and survive. To do this, they may internalize a false sense of control over the abusive experiences and believe that if they learn to be "good" in the eyes of the abuser they can reduce the frequency of abuse, even avoid it altogether, and perhaps even gain the attention and positive behavior of the abusive adult. Many behaviors understood as pathological in the psychological functioning of adolescents and adults originate in the child's natural reactions to a profoundly unnatural and unhealthy environment (Intebí, 2007).

The model just presented (Summit, 1983) helps to identify the many potentially harmful elements in the abusive situation, beyond sexual acts: secrecy, objectification, confusion, traumatic bonding, pressure, fear, helplessness, defenselessness, etc. A special type of dynamic can also be identified in the special case of clergy child sexual abuse (Benkert & Doyle, 2009): an added fear, the fear of a supreme being's reaction to something the person does or chooses not to do. The fear that arises from the threat of displeasing the priest carries over into the fear of displeasing God, a fear that can be overwhelming and immobilizing. Confusion, guilt, and shame (especially toxic if pleasurable sexual feelings have been experienced) seem to be more intense in these cases. In addition, while secrecy and silence are not specific to this type of abuse, the strategies employed to obtain silence and secrecy may be different: fostering the feeling of being singled out by God for a special relationship with the perpetrator, special treatment by the perpetrator, the spiritual reward of "going to heaven," the fear of being punished for denying the will of God and the clergy, etc. (Fogler et al., 2008).

The negative consequences of this whole situation have been widely described. They usually focus on listing the number of mental problems and disorders that can develop in the short, medium, and long term. However, this article will follow the *traumatogenic model* proposed by Finkelhor and Browne (1986) to gain an in-depth knowledge of their life experience and to understand how abuse changes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral world and referents of the victim.

These authors describe common feelings in CSA victims. The first characteristic is *stigmatization;* they feel "marked", ashamed, defective, as described by the "damaged goods syndrome": they believe that others perceive them to be of inferior quality, they have feelings of guilt, they feel responsible for the abuse or harm caused by telling someone about it. The child feels irreparably damaged forever. Through stigmatization, a series of negative connotations associated with the abuse (bad, shameful, guilty) are transferred to the child, which are then incorporated into his or her self-image. The second characteristic is *traumatic sexualization:* sexual abuse generates a distorted and developmentally inappropriate idea of the child's sexuality, which can lead to age-inappropriate behavior. It manifests itself in several ways, including rejection of sex, overestimation of sexuality, sexual identity problems, sexualized behaviors, avoidance of sexual encounters, or negative sexual experiences. The third characteristic is the presence of a significant state of *helplessness and loss of control*, with the presence of fear and anxiety when feeling unable to control aversive events; the perception of one's own vulnerability and victimization is extreme. After repeated invasion of their bodily space against their will, their self-perception as a victim is reinforced and, consequently, they need to control and even impose themselves. Aggressive or exploitative behaviors of other people, avoidance behaviors, or remaining in relationships where they are re-victimized may be observed.

In addition to these three characteristics, if the abuser was a trusted adult for the child, a profound *feeling of betrayal* appears*:* the child discovers that the person he/she trusts and depends on has caused him/her harm, and this can lead to a general loss of trust in others and an exaggerated fear of rejection and abandonment, together with an experience of guilt and shame (usually shown through anger) and great difficulty in establishing healthy bonds, with extreme dependence or, on the contrary, a rejection of intimate relationships.

Finally, one last characteristic has also been described in the experience of those cases in which the abuse was committed by a religious figure: *the spiritual impact*, called by some the "murder of the soul" or "spiritual devastation" (Benkert & Doyle, 2009). The person adds to his other experiences the feeling of being a sinner, a strong confusion about what happened, anger and rage towards religion, great difficulty in believing and connecting with his or her spiritual self, and an immense experience of loneliness. A decreased belief in God, due to abuse, is an important predictor of social and mental health problems (Pereda et al., 2022). Some authors even suggest that the impact of CSA by clergy is similar to that of familial incest, with a particularly devastating impact on identity development (Brady, 2008; Fogler et al., 2008). Varona (2020) also points out the added harm of institutional (ecclesiastical and public) silence, translated into a lack of solidarity towards the victims.

Can forgiveness be approached in such a situation? Iatrogenic concepts of forgiveness

After this examination of our initial point, the offense (the abuse) and its impact, the reluctance to consider forgiveness as a way of working with the victim is better understood. The psychology of forgiveness currently offers solid knowledge to guide professionals in the considerations that need to be raised about the possibility of working with forgiveness in child sexual abuse. In the first place, it is necessary to understand in depth the concepts of forgiveness that are applied when dealing with this topic, and, secondly, it is necessary to reflect on the type of forgiveness that allows the greatest liberation for the victim.

It is essential to make explicit the concept of forgiveness that underlies every professional opinion or decision. Forgiveness is commonly confused with a moral obligation, "pretending nothing happened," absolution or a lack of justice, excusing behavior, or reconciliation. For survivors of CSA, the most damaging definitions of forgiveness are those that understand it as "letting go" of all negative emotions, eliminating the possibility of negative consequences for the offender (Tracy, 1999). These understandings of forgiveness do not liberate from abuse; they only perpetuate it and imply a lack of consideration for the victim and his or her pain. Prolonged abuse in a relationship creates complex coercive interactions between victim and abuser, combining violence and dependency (Lahav et al., 2019). Maintaining misconceptions about forgiveness can further weaken the victim's ability to protect him- or herself by making him or her more vulnerable and facilitating the continuation of abuse.

The psychology of forgiveness has managed to establish some common points about the concept of forgiveness shared by most authors in the field. First, forgiveness is a right of the victim, never an obligation. One cannot forgive sincerely if one cannot forgive freely (Tracy, 1999), and this does not happen until the circle of victimization and helplessness in which the victim finds him- or herself has been broken, until the victim has built protective boundaries; otherwise, he or she is put at risk of further abuse. As the aforementioned author points out:

> "Never say or imply that the client must forgive the abuser. Forgiveness is not essential to healing (...) If you have the belief [that] survivors must forgive the abuser in order to heal, you should not work with survivors" (p. 220)

Forgiveness, moreover, is clearly differentiated from reconciliation. Forgiveness is an individual process, a change in the heart of the victim that leads to a reduction of the discomfort experienced when one is a victim of a serious offense, thus helping to mitigate and alleviate negative emotions and thoughts and reducing the tendency to show avoidance or revenge behaviors (McCullough, 2008). Reconciliation, on the other hand, is a process that aims to restore relationships and trust between two parties. If we do not differentiate well between the two processes when considering the possibility of forgiveness, the victim may give up forgiving, thinking that it implies re-engaging with the abuser (Freedman, 1998). Not all forgiveness processes involve reconciliation. Forgiveness without reconciliation arises in situations where there is no guarantee that the crime will not be repeated or in situations where the relationship is not equal and true reconciliation is therefore impossible. Resuming the relationship with the abuser should only be considered, according to some authors (Cooney et al., 2011), when there are indicators of genuine repentance on the part of the offender: taking full responsibility for the abuse (confessing), recognizing the magnitude of the harm caused to the victim, showing remorse for having caused it, showing respect for the victim, setting boundaries so that the abuse does not happen again, and taking steps to change the disruptive behavior patterns that led to the abuse.

Forgiveness should also not be confused with the absence of the need for justice. True forgiveness does not interrupt the process of justice, nor does it eliminate the penalty the abuser deserves for his or her behavior. It is possible to forgive and still seek justice; forgiveness happens within the victim and frees the victim from post-offense hatred and suffering.

In short, only by distinguishing the concept of forgiveness from others such as absolution, reconciliation, moral duty, or renunciation of justice can the possibility of offering forgiveness to the victim be safely addressed.

Another important conceptual issue is the nature of forgiveness appropriate for CSA victims. From the psychology of forgiveness, two types of forgiveness are distinguished in this aspect. First, what is known as "negotiated forgiveness" or conditional forgiveness (Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018) implies that certain conditions must be met before the possibility of forgiveness can be considered, usually the assumption of responsibility, the expression of regret, and the presence of reparative behaviors. This negotiated forgiveness has been advocated as the most appropriate for CSA victims (Tracy, 1999). However, a sexual offender is unlikely to take responsibility, show remorse, or feel empathy toward the victim (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017). Furthermore, if forgiveness is contingent on the abuser's behavior, the abuser maintains his power over the victim, deciding when the forgiveness process can or cannot begin, thereby again weakening the victim's capacity for control (Tracy, 1999). In addition, it has been shown that most victims who have decided to forgive indicate that forgiveness came from a personal or individual process, without depending on the attitude or behavior of the abuser (Helm, et al., 2005).

Therefore, intervention processes based on a second type of forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, have been proposed to help victims of CSA (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Tracy, 1999; Walton, 2005). Unconditional forgiveness is understood as an individual process carried out by the victim in an unconditional, unidirectional way, without the participation of the offender.

Some of the proposals focus on narrative therapy and self-forgiveness (Nguyen & Bellehumeur, 2013), while others follow the steps suggested in one of the main interventions to facilitate forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). This intervention model presents four phases, each with different "units" (processes) to work on: 1) the uncovering phase, where the individual tries to better understand how the offense has painfully affected him/her in all aspects; 2) the decision phase, which aims to get the person to decide to forgive and commit to that decision. This phase has three steps or tasks: understanding how the old strategies are not working, especially with respect to anger, and the need to look for new ways of reacting to injustice and relating with others; considering forgiveness as an option; and attaining the commitment to forgive the offender, to abandon seeking revenge or thoughts of resentment; 3) the work phase, in which one enters into a deep process of forgiveness, which involves several tasks: cognitive reformulation of who the offender is, considering him/her in context, achieving a certain level of empathy and compassion towards the offender (it is enough that at some point the subject recognizes part of the vulnerability of the aggressor), working on the pain, seeking to tolerate and accept it (this does not exclude seeking justice), and expressing in some way the (moral) gift that he/she has decided to give the offender by forgiving them; 4) the deepening phase, which pursues several objectives: finding meaning in the suffering and in the process of forgiveness (being careful not to lead the person to a passive acceptance of what happened by renouncing justice), realizing that we have needed forgiveness from others in the past, realizing that we are not alone, that we have support, realizing that we have a new purpose in life because of the offense, that we can offer to others what we have learned during the process, and finally, realizing the emotional release, the growing feeling of well-being, self-esteem, and hope.

Tracy (1999) and Walton (2005) have proposed different adaptations of this process to the particular characteristics of the sexual abuse, proposing a deep and liberating endeavor from which the victim emerges strengthened and recovers his/her sense of control, a key element in the healing process.

As this review has shown, forgiveness is a complex concept, with multiple dimensions and possibilities, and it can offer victims a valuable resource for overcoming their pain. Moreover, although forgiveness is not essential to a victim's healing process, the psychology of forgiveness offers numerous studies that have shown the positive effects of forgiveness on victims of sexual abuse (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Ghahari, 2018; Lee & Enright, 2014; Rahman, et al., 2018).

Important elements when working on forgiveness with CSA victims

A detailed description of the proposed interventions is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to mention some of the essential elements that these interventions propose for working on forgiveness with adult victims of abuse (not specifically CSA) thus facilitating the positive effects of forgiveness. These elements are key concepts that should underpin any intervention on forgiveness (Casey, 1998; Cooney et al., 2011; Tracy, 1999; Walton, 2005).

1. It should be considered that forgiveness is a long, difficult, and slow process, the more intense the offense has been. It is advisable to take the necessary time and not rush the process.
2. The first step in working on forgiveness is always to acknowledge the offense, without minimizing or denying it; without this step there is a risk of offering superficial, inadequate, and unhealthy forgiveness. The victim must be willing to name and reclaim the abuse, and to identify the moral and legal rules that were broken, how the abuse broke those rules, and what the consequences have been in his or her case. When the victim is able to recognize the crime and the damage, identifying all the losses, the pain of the losses, of the lived experience, will appear. Grieving is an essential element in the healing process.
3. It is important to validate the feelings expressed by the victims without blaming them; it is recommended to respect the silences and not to fill them in, and not to suggest feelings or answers. To avoid revictimization, it is also recommended to avoid questions that include the word "why", since they start from the assumption of a peer-to-peer relationship that is part of the abuser's cognitive mechanisms and transferring it to the victim means making him or her responsible in some way for the abuse. These are iatrogenic questions in themselves.

4. It is important to overcome helplessness and a lack of control; the victim needs to regain a sense of control and dignity. Control over one's own life, present and future, is associated with improvements in adjustment after the abuse experience (Davidson, et al. , 2013).
5. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power, a violation of personal boundaries. It is critical, therefore, that victims establish new boundaries and take responsibility for protecting themselves and others from further abuse; only from there can forgiveness be considered. To do this they must make important decisions about which people they want in their lives and how they want to be treated by those people, they must develop appropriate guidelines for determining a person's trustworthiness and establish rules of conduct for themselves so as not to put themselves at risk, all without in any way conveying any kind of responsibility for the abuse suffered.
6. Many victims find it helpful to try to understand why it happened, to understand the offender's behavior by placing them in context and seeing them as a fallible human, even showing empathy (at least cognitively), without confusing this understanding with justification or absolution (Cooney et al., 2011). As the victim moves away from the entanglement of abuse, they see the aggressor in a different light; from their position of strength, they lose their fear, and the aggressor becomes "human" and less intimidating (Shepp et al., 2019). However, at this point their empathy and compassion do not keep them pathologically connected to him.
7. At some point, victims must accept that the crime has occurred and that it is part of their own lives; it is not a matter of trying to "pretend it didn't happen" and forget about it, but of finding a place for it and being able to go on living. The recovery process includes finding hope for the future and finding meaning in life (Morton et al., 2019).
8. Self-forgiveness is a fundamental step in the recovery of victims (Nguyen & Bellehumeur, 2013). Although it may seem surprising from the logic of an outsider, victims may feel guilty for different reasons: for getting into that situation, for staying in it, for keeping the secret, for harming the community, for subsequent behaviors and problems, for "being defective", for the emotions felt, for the spiritual difficulty, etc. Part of the work is to help victims understand that the problem is not them, to reposition the blame on the aggressor and overcome shame, recognizing that the problem is the clearly wrong and unjust behavior of the aggressor and understanding the confusion generated.
9. The common assumption is that it is undesirable for the victim to resume the relationship with the abuser, especially when the relationship is potentially dangerous, physically or psychologically, for the victim. (Helm, Cook, & Berecz, 2005). In fact, these authors note that most of the victims interviewed indicated that they preferred to keep their distance from the abuser, regardless of whether they said they had forgiven him or not. But some victims express a desire to be reunited with the abuser. If victims say they may consider the possibility of reconciliation, it should be probed whether they do so realistically, with adjusted expectations about the abuser and the reunion (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017). In this case, it is important to remember that reconciliation requires that the two parties be placed on the same plane of equality; only if this equality (of power) is achieved, when the victim has set boundaries and learned to protect him- or herself, and when the abuser has stopped using their manipulative strategies, is reconciliation possible.
10. It is important to be wary of social pressure (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017), i.e., the existence of inflexible norms and expectations about victims that may have been conveyed to victims; for example, that the abuse is unforgivable, that they should forget the abuse and not talk about it, that they should forgive to protect the integrity of the family or community, or that they should be "the eternal victim" and never forgive in order to make clear the seriousness of the offense. Considering CSA as unforgivable may represent the moral judgment of the witnesses, not necessarily of the victims; by advocating that CSA is unforgivable, the victim is trapped in his or her victim status.
11. The role of secondary victims must be considered, the people close to the victim who are also affected by the abuse suffered by the victim; for them it is usually more difficult to forgive, and they may even experience it as a betrayal of the direct victim (Cooney et al., 2011).
12. In victims of CSA in the church there will be spiritual needs that need to be accompanied and experiences that need to be expressed (Rudolfsson & Tidefors, 2015). They may need help to connect with God and to feel accepted in their difficulty trusting Him and even in their criticism of religion (which may lead to more guilt, shame, or fear of punishment)
13. Finally, it may be useful to consider forgiveness as a continuum. Each person travels their own path and establishes the moment when the offense and the abuser are no longer the ones who make decisions about their life, or their happiness. Each path is different and unique.

It can be concluded that a genuine process of forgiveness has occurred when the person shows the ability to handle anger constructively, experiences an increase in positive attitudes, especially toward the offender, is able to give and receive love and experience gratitude, and increases his or her ability to ask for forgiveness from others (Vitz & Meade, 2011). When the forgiveness process is complete, the victim perceives significant personal growth.

In conclusion, forgiveness can be proposed as a tool to help and heal the pain and suffering of victims of child sexual abuse, but great care must always be taken when offering it, avoiding transmitting to the victims any kind of moral obligation and maintaining a concept of forgiveness that respects justice and protects the victim.

Conflict of interest

There is not conflict of interest

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