

The Birth of a New Science: The Psychology of Forgiveness

In 1985, Professor Robert Enright of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison launched the psychology of forgiveness, or the study of how people go about forgiving others in the face of deep injustice. The beginnings of this work in psychology, which now includes thousands of researchers and psychotherapists worldwide, was quiet and inauspicious, consisting of a seminar every Friday morning at the university in which graduate students, professors, and community members attended. The first publication on the psychology of forgiveness occurred in 1989.

The forgiveness work, however, did not truly “take off” until Professor Enright received a letter one day in 1990 from William Walker, head of the Mid-West Family Broadcasting Group. Dr. Walker explained that he had received his doctoral degree in psychological measurement from UW-Madison decades earlier and that he now wanted to help spread the forgiveness message throughout the world.

Drs. Walker and Enright then collaborated on research involving forgiveness, successfully developing a psychological measurement tool to assess people’s degree of forgiving others which is now the measurement standard in the field—The Enright Forgiveness Inventory. They collaborated on award-winning research by pioneering forgiveness therapy within a residential drug rehabilitation facility. They also conducted [scientific forgiveness studies](#) with:

- incest survivors
- the elderly hurt by family members
- college students hurt by emotionally-distant parents
- men hurt by the abortion decision of a partner
- emotionally-abused women
- cardiac patients
- Hospice patients dying of cancer

In 1994, Drs. Walker and Enright co-founded the International Forgiveness Institute, Inc. (IFI) that today is a leading institute for disseminating forgiveness information to people worldwide. Following the passing of William Walker, his son Thomas stepped in to continue the forgiveness work. Thomas and Dr. Enright pioneered a new initiative in 2001, again unique from a global perspective—the creation of forgiveness curricula in schools as a way to renew communities beset by violence and war. The ongoing, international success of that initiative is highlighted throughout this website.

Without the involvement of William and Thomas Walker, as well as the significant financial support of their Mid-West Family Broadcasting Group, this field of forgiveness would not be where it is today.

Read more about the early history of the International Forgiveness Institute in [The Science of Forgiveness](#).