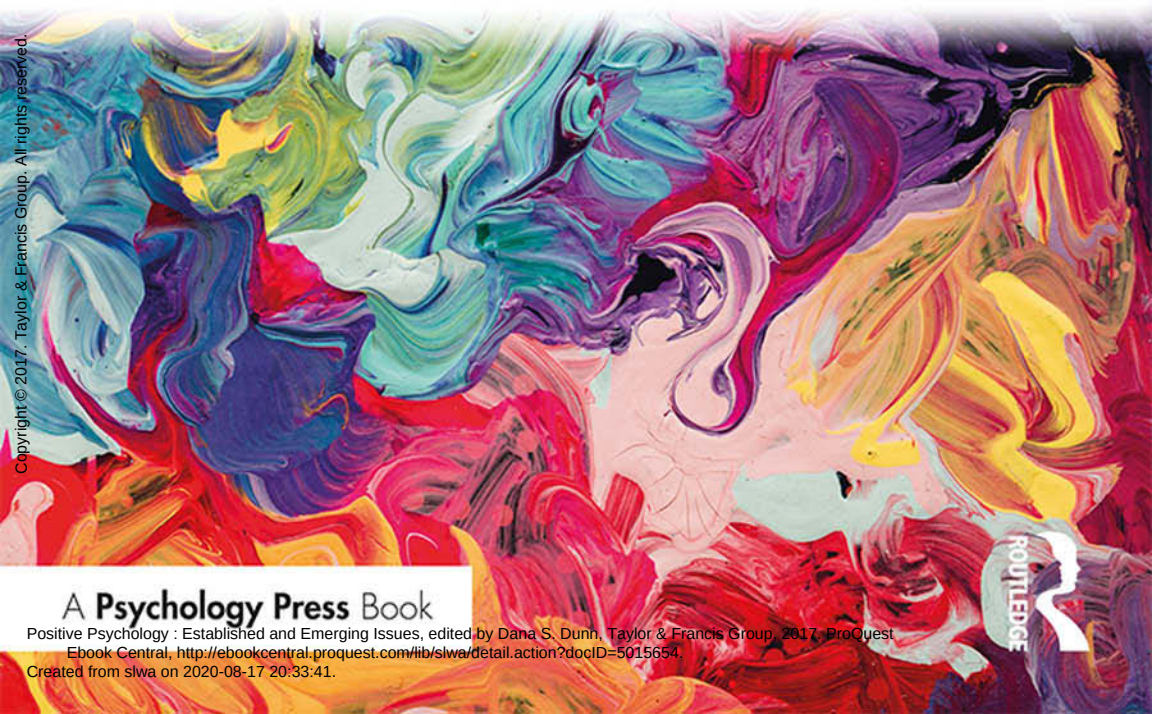


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Established and Emerging Issues

Edited by
Dana S. Dunn



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FORGIVENESS AND WELL-BEING

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet and Lindsey Root Luna

Forgiveness: What Is It?

Forgiveness is one of the virtues addressed in this volume that can arise only in the context of an interpersonal injustice. The possibility of forgiveness emerges when a transgressor acts, or fails to act, in a way that is unjust and wounds a victim. The victim's perception of the injustice and the wound may differ considerably from how the transgressor or witnesses perceive it. Yet, the victim must contend with his or her encounter with, and perception of, the violation and its repercussions. Depending on the relational context and the nature of the transgression, the affective wounds may include sadness, fear, anger, and their variations. Ideally, the transgressor will recognize the wrongdoing, experience remorse, and own responsibility for the violation and its implications. This internal experience would then motivate the offender to confess, apologize, make amends, and demonstrate a repentant change in behavior that honors the humanity of the victim, community, and self. In forgiving, a victim responds to the transgressor in prosocial ways that recognize the humanity of the offender, while still holding him or her accountable for the offense and genuinely desiring that person's good.

Granting forgiveness is reserved for those times when we hold someone accountable for a moral and relational breach that caused damage and hurt us (e.g. through betrayal, maligning our reputation, mockery, theft of a valued possession, murder of a loved one). In considering the breach and its attendant emotions, an important theoretical construct is the injustice gap (Davis et al., 2016; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003), which describes the degree to which a victim perceives distance between the ideal justice and the actual post-offense experience of justice. We contend that when a transgression occurs, there is also a gap between how things were in a relationship before

the transgression and how they are now. Both gaps—pre-transgression versus post-transgression and actual versus ideal justice—are inextricably connected to one's relational and moral perceptions, including one's emotions. Depending on the nature of the wrongdoing, the victim may tend to totalize the offender in terms of the offense (e.g. the offender is a liar, a cheat, a thief, a murderer) in such a way that the offender is *infrahumanized* (i.e. seen as comparatively less human) or *dehumanized* (e.g. demonized, viewed as a monster). The emotional implications of the injustice gap and one's view of the offender can fuel motivations of avoidance and revenge, while diminishing benevolence (e.g. McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). Emotions of sadness and fear can motivate avoidance of the offender. Alternatively, fear and anger can motivate revenge-seeking behavior, thereby seeking vindication through vindictiveness. Merely adjusting the victim's emotions does not constitute forgiveness, because there are many ways to reduce one's perception of sadness, fear, anxiety, and anger that are unrelated to forgiveness, including positive behaviors (e.g. engaging in an irrelevant but uplifting or pleasurable activity), and negative activities (e.g. exacting revenge; Wade & Worthington, 2003). Hence, forgiveness publications time after time provide lists of what forgiveness *is not*. Forgiveness is not denying, excusing, minimizing, or tolerating an offense (see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Witvliet & McCullough, 2007; Worthington, 2001, 2009). We believe that forgiveness ought to take seriously the safety of the victim (e.g. physically, emotionally, spiritually) and justice-oriented responses to the transgressor (see Worthington, 2009). Forgiveness is not the same thing as restoring an offender to a prior position, nor does it imply reconciliation (Smedes, 1996). Forgiveness involves a transformation within the victim toward the offender that can be genuine even if the words, "I forgive you" are not explicitly stated, whereas reconciliation requires trust-building, reciprocity and fair mindedness from both parties (Worthington, 2003).

Forgiveness theory and research point to the importance of focusing on the humanity of the offender (e.g. Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr, Hinman, & Knoll, 2015), which resists totalizing him or her in terms of the offense (e.g. merely a liar, cheat, thief, or murderer). This approach first tells the truth about the offender and the offense. It emphasizes the offender's humanity by saying this is a *person* who lied, a *person* who cheated, a *person* who stole, or a *person* who murdered. Telling the truth about the offense requires seeing the offense behavior for what it is, an injustice that carries with it painful, disruptive, and damaging implications. Responding morally places a special burden on the victim at the very same time he or she is worn down. Nevertheless, the victim has particular insights about the offender because of his or her role and experience in facing the offense. These insights can allow the victim to take a second step: reappraising the offender and offense, for example, by viewing the perpetrator's lie as evidence that shows his or her need to develop the moral capacity to tell the truth, or to bite one's tongue. A third element of granting forgiveness is to

desire that transformation for the offender, to hope for that good change in the transgressor (whether or not the relationship can be reconciled). Granting forgiveness involves holding the perpetrator responsible for the wrongdoing, and forgiveness can be genuine even if reconciliation is not safe, possible, or wise.

Thus, a research-tested practice that facilitates forgiveness involves (1) emphasizing the humanity of the offender while holding him or her responsible for the transgression, (2) seeing the transgression as evidence that the offender needs to be transformed by learning, growing, or changing, and (3) desiring that good change for the offender (see Witvliet, DeYoung, Hofelich, & DeYoung, 2011; Witvliet, Knoll, Hinman, & DeYoung, 2010; Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015). We propose that these elements of granting forgiveness also have corollaries for transgressor responses. Transgressors can (1) resist totalizing themselves in terms of the offense and recognize their own humanity, (2) see the wrongdoing as evidence of the need to be transformed through learning, growing, and repentant change, and (3) desire that good change for themselves to prevent committing that injustice again and cultivate positive behavior changes toward others. Humble repentance sees the injustice clearly and does not let oneself off the moral hook, but neither does it confuse appropriate guilt and regret with unrelenting shame and self-condemnation—which work against genuine change in perpetrators (see Witvliet, Hinman, Exline, & Brandt, 2011). Rather, humble repentance sees the wrong as evidence of the need to change in ways that prompt confession, restitution, and behavior changes that prevent repetition of the wrongdoing. Furthermore, repentance and receiving forgiveness can be authentic even when the interpersonal relationship cannot be restored.

These forgiveness-oriented responses, which are inherently relational, have demonstrated beneficial side effects for the forgiver (and for the transgressor as well). These well-being side effects, specifically for the victim, have garnered substantial research attention in positive psychology for a variety of reasons (e.g. clinically minded researchers first attend to those who recognize they are hurt and desire help; people more readily identify their own hurts than the times they cause hurts to others; and research is easier to conduct on individuals than dyads and groups). Nevertheless, it is important for psychological scientists and practitioners—along with philosophers and theologians who study forgiveness—to retain a focus on the relational and moral dimensions of forgiveness for both victims and offenders, even as we attend to its implications for relational and emotional well-being.

The Science of Forgiveness and Well-Being

Within the social sciences, the measurement of forgiveness has received substantial attention (see Worthington et al., 2014, for state and trait instruments; and Witvliet, Van Tongeren, & Root Luna, 2015, on measurement within

healthcare). Because there are many different ways to reduce unforgiving responses in the short term (e.g. distraction, minimizing), researchers increasingly measure both reductions in unforgiveness (e.g. avoidance and revenge; McCullough et al., 1998) and the presence of benevolent forgiveness motivations (McCullough et al., 2006). Just as interpersonal forgiveness is inextricably relational, forgiveness is a time-bound process (McCullough & Root, 2005). The injustice gap results in negative emotions and responses that change over time; these changes constitute forgiveness (in contrast, simply abstaining from negative reactions to a wrong has been dubbed “forbearance”; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Overall, the steepest change in victims’ emotions and motivations tend to occur near to the incident, with the rate of change slowing to an asymptote as time progresses (McCullough, Root Luna, Berry, Tabak, & Bono, 2010). These changes over time carry with them ramifications for victims, transgressors, and the relationships in which offenses occur.

Relational Well-Being and Forgiveness

Following the relationship breach of an interpersonal transgression, the response of the victim—whether it is avoidant, vengeful, benevolent, or neutral—has the potential to impact ongoing relationships. That is, granting forgiveness impacts subsequent interactions and relationship health. Using an experimental methodology, Karremans and Van Lange (2004) found that when participants recalled forgiven offenses, they endorsed more prosocial orientations (e.g. accommodation, sacrifice intentions) than when recalling unforgiven offenses and relationship partners. Specifically, participants were asked to list several important activities in their lives; participants who recalled a forgiven offender were more likely to report they would sacrifice that activity to maintain a relationship with their partner. Karremans and Van Lange also compared prosocial intentions toward a forgiven partner with intentions toward a neutral partner (no offense recalled), which indicated that a forgiving response restored intentions to baseline, rather than increasing prosociality *per se*. Similarly, when people were asked to remember a time they had forgiven a relationship partner (compared to a time when he or she had not forgiven), participants used more prosocial language (e.g. we, us), reported greater closeness with their partner, and engaged in more general prosocial behavior (i.e. donated more money to an unrelated charity). Longitudinally, among individuals who had been harmed by a relationship partner, levels of forgiveness predicted participants’ subsequent ratings of closeness and commitment over a nine-week period (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006).

Among romantic relationship partners specifically, relationship satisfaction and forgiveness appear to be bidirectional, with relationship quality predicting subsequent forgiveness (e.g. Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005) and forgiveness predicting later marital satisfaction (e.g. Fincham & Beach, 2007).

Physiologically, victims' attempts at reconciliation have been associated with reduced blood pressure in both victims and transgressors (Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2012). Forgiveness has also been evaluated as a predictor of relationship outcomes; Hall and Fincham (2006), for example, found that forgiveness mediated the relationship between partner attributions and relationship dissolution following a partner's infidelity.

In practice settings, therapists are incorporating forgiveness interventions with individuals, couples, families, and groups (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington & Sandage, 2016). Research studies have addressed the role of forgiveness in marriages (Olson, Marshall, Goddard, & Schramm, 2015) and families (Fincham, 2015). In couples, Braithwaite, Selby, and Fincham (2011) found that forgiveness predicted relationship-oriented self-regulation (e.g. actively looking for ways to improve the relationship) and low levels of negative interpersonal behaviors (e.g. withdrawal, avoidance, aggressive acts), and these in turn predicted the level of relationship satisfaction.

Among offenders, conciliatory transgressor behaviors—such as apologies or attempts to repair the damaged relationship—can facilitate forgiveness. Both longitudinally and experimentally, transgressor behaviors have been shown to influence forgiveness and perceptions of friendship (Tabak, McCullough, Root Luna, Bono, & Berry, 2012). Apologies that are well-timed and perceived as sincere lead to increased forgiveness (Carlisle et al., 2012; Pansera & La Guardia, 2012), which then facilitate positive relationship outcomes.

An important question arises in relational contexts: What factors predict whether victims are more or less likely to forgive their offenders? Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag (2010) conducted a meta-analysis to understand the state and trait characteristics of cognition and affect, as well as constraints that predict whether one person forgives another (measured as reduced unforgiveness and/or increased forgiveness). They found that the strongest predictor of forgiveness was the victim's state empathy for the offender, accounting for 26 percent of the variance in forgiveness scores. A close second was the victim's state anger, which accounted for 17 percent of the variance. Moderate predictors included the victim's rumination and perceptions of the transgressor's intent to harm, responsibility, and apology. Although this study did not find that gender significantly impacted these findings, Miller and colleagues specifically focused on studies designed to test gender effects and found a small yet meaningful effect indicating that females were more forgiving than males (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008); it is possible that gender differences on trait empathy may play a role here, though the mechanism(s) driving this effect have yet to be systematically evaluated.

Among transgressors, guilt (but not shame) is associated with forgiveness-seeking (Riek, Root Luna, & Schnabelrauch, 2013). By studying the personality characteristics of transgressors, McNulty and Russell (2016) discovered an important factor in the dyadic context in which the transgression occurs, noting

that transgressors' trait agreeableness is an important predictor of whether or not more transgressions will occur after being forgiven. Disagreeable transgressors committed more transgressions after being forgiven, perceiving that their forgiving partners were less likely to become angry. By contrast, agreeable transgressors committed fewer transgressions after being forgiven, feeling obligated not to transgress again.

The possibility of reoffending following the repair of an offense-damaged relationship highlights the important question of whether forgiveness always facilitates healthy outcomes for the forgiver. Although we have noted that forgiveness need not involve reconciliation (see Smedes, 1996), in the lived experience, these concepts are not always separated (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Among women in domestic violence shelters, state forgiveness was associated with greater intentions to return to an abusive spouse (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Similarly, McNulty (2008, 2010) found that both dispositional and state forgiveness were associated with increased offenses and negative spousal behavior among participants with high levels of negative behaviors in their marriages. McNulty and Fincham (2012) underscored that the outcomes of forgiveness may depend on context. Although forgiveness has the potential to promote closeness and relationship satisfaction among well-intentioned relationship partners, it can also facilitate continued offenses and abuse within unhealthy relationships, especially if the perpetrator's personality is disagreeable (McNulty & Russell, 2016).

The Impact of Granting Forgiveness on Psychological and Physical Well-Being

The science and practice of forgiveness are combined in research on the affective implications of granting forgiveness. Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the efficacy of forgiveness therapy interventions for individuals, couples, and groups. Results highlighted that theoretically grounded, explicit forgiveness interventions, which focused on helping people grant forgiveness, were more effective than alternative therapies (e.g. supportive/placebo, treatment as usual, incomplete forgiveness interventions) for significantly increasing forgiveness, while also increasing hope and mental health. Furthermore, longer doses of time spent cultivating forgiveness increased effects. Once treatment length and modality (individual, group) were controlled, treatment models were equally effective. More severe transgressions were harder to forgive and benefited from more targeted forgiveness treatments. Overall, the pre- to post-intervention effect size on forgiveness was 0.78, and the effects persisted after treatment concluded. In another meta-analysis of group interventions, empathy emerged as the key predictor of granting forgiveness (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Empathy is a central feature in Worthington's (2001) REACH model of forgiveness, used primarily in groups

(*Recall* the hurt, *Empathize* with the offender, *Altruistically* grant forgiveness, *Commit* to forgive, *Hold on* to forgiveness), and compassion is a key component in Enright's treatment model of forgiveness used primarily with individuals.

The relationship between forgiveness and well-being also has been assessed using longitudinal designs. Fluctuations in forgiveness were related to subsequent increases in self-reported hedonic well-being (i.e. satisfaction with life, positive and negative mood, physical symptoms; Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008). Cross-lagged analyses supported the authors' hypothesis that forgiveness led to increased feelings of closeness with the transgressor and relationship partner, which then facilitated hedonic well-being.

Shorter paradigms have tested the emotional and physiological implications of having a more or less forgiving personality. Lawler et al. (2003) found that both trait forgivingness and state forgiveness levels during interviews about a betrayal by a parent and by a partner/friend were associated with lower blood pressure. Conversely, participants who were low in both trait and state forgiveness had the highest rate pressure product scores indicative of cardiac stress. During interviews, forgiveness was positively associated with empathy and positive emotion, and inversely related to unforgiving motivations, brow muscle tension, and blood pressure (for parent betrayals). In subsequent research, Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, and Edwards (2008) again found that trait and state forgiveness were inversely associated with cardiac reactivity, as well as other health indicators. For example, people higher in trait forgivingness also used less alcohol and medication, and they had lower blood pressure and rate pressure product scores. State levels of forgiveness were associated with fewer physical symptoms and lower heart rate. Lawler-Row et al. (2008) further discovered that the tendency to express anger outwardly mediated relationships between trait forgivingness and heart rate, and between state forgiveness and rate pressure product effects.

Experimental paradigms have induced and tested forgiving and unforgiving responses, plus alternatives, to determine concomitant effects on well-being emotionally and physiologically. Early experimental research tested the well-being side effects of rumination, grudge-holding, empathy and forgiveness (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). The emotional and physiological side effects of empathy and forgiveness differed significantly from those of rumination and grudge-holding. During the two unforgiving conditions, participants demonstrated significantly more potent negative (anger, fear, and sadness) and aroused emotions, as well as greater muscle tension at the brow and under the eye, with stress reactivity in blood pressure, heart rate, and skin conductance. By contrast, during the empathic and forgiving conditions, participants demonstrated greater perceived control, positive emotion, and calmer physiological profiles.

To date, four tests of compassion inductions in relation to forgiveness have been conducted. In two of these, compassionate reappraisal was contrasted with

rumination and suppression (Witvliet, DeYoung et al., 2011; Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015). When people developed compassion, they focused on the person's humanity, moving toward wishing the person a positive future despite the hurtful behavior; when engaged in emotional suppression, people thought about the offender and the offense, while trying not to experience or express any negative emotions associated with the offender and offense.

Witvliet, DeYoung et al. (2011) found that compared to offense ruminations, both approaches—compassion and suppression—diminished intense negative emotion (in ratings and written description of what it was like to respond in these ways) and muscle tension under the eye, while maintaining the cardiac parasympathetic response at baseline levels (whereas offense rumination impaired this cardiac response). Suppression also calmed heart rate and tension at the brow muscle. However, only compassionate reappraisal significantly increased forgiveness, along with positive emotions, smiling (zygomatic EMG), and social language.

In a subsequent experiment (Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015), participants learned and practiced just one of these coping responses—either compassion or suppression—launching the response immediately after rumination (on half of the trials). In this investigation, only the compassion learners had significantly higher empathy and emotional forgiveness ratings right away, after the first trial of using the strategy. This study also found that learning compassionate reappraisal prompted changes in the way participants ruminated; even though participants were not even being asked to re-evaluate the transgression or transgressor, when compassion learners ruminated at the end of the study, they did so with empathy for their offenders. Again, although both compassion and suppression coping diminished negative emotions associated with the offense (measured with ratings, language use, and brow muscle tension), only compassion increased empathy and forgiveness—along with positive emotion and calmed sympathetic nervous system activation (measured by the pre-ejection period). Cognitively, results showed that while compassion was not easy (i.e. it had subtle cognitive demands, reducing Stroop test accuracy and speed), participants were still able to perform a cognitive task within normal limits.

Two additional experiments tested compassion, but this time in contrast to benefit-focused reappraisal and offense rumination (Baker, Williams, Witvliet, Hill, 2017; Witvliet et al., 2010). The peripheral physiology study by Witvliet et al. (2010) found that both of these approaches were associated with significantly greater empathy and forgiveness, positive emotion (happiness, joy), reduced anger, reduced arousal, and greater control than rumination. They also calmed muscle tension above the brow (corrugator) and had cardiac parasympathetic response (high frequency heart rate variability; HF HRV) scores at relaxation baseline levels, whereas rumination had significantly impaired HF HRV. When compassion and benefit-focused reappraisal effects were contrasted, compassion outperformed benefit-focus reappraisal for prompting

empathy, forgiveness, and social language use, as well as slower heart rates. By contrast, benefit-finding was associated with significantly more joy and gratitude language, along with the greatest increase in HF HRV, associated with parasympathetic control and emotion regulation.

Building on this approach, Baker et al. (2017) asked participants to recall a recent interpersonal offense and apply each emotion regulation strategy. Both reappraisals increased decisional and emotional forgiveness. Nevertheless, compassion-focused reappraisal prompted the greatest increases in both types of forgiveness. Both reappraisal strategies also increased positively oriented well-being measures (e.g. joy, gratitude) compared to offense rumination, and compassion-focused reappraisal prompted the largest effect on empathy. Late positive potential (LPP) amplitudes measured in response to unpleasant affect words were larger after the benefit-focused reappraisal strategy, which supported the interpretation that the unpleasant stimuli were strongly incongruent with the positive orientation of the benefit-focused reappraisal emotion regulation strategy. Compassionate reappraisal likely maintained a combination of negative and positive emotional processing, whereas benefit-focused reappraisal was more uniformly focused on finding for oneself the treasure (i.e. benefits) in the dirt of the offense.

The Impact of Seeking Forgiveness on Psychological and Physical Well-Being

The emerging literature on seeking forgiveness is showing that it can have positive side effects similar to forgiveness granting. A key point in the literature emphasizes the importance of transgressor change with responsibility for relational repair toward the victim. With this in mind, Witvliet, Hinman et al. (2011) developed a repentance-writing induction. They contrasted repentance with rumination (focused on self-condemnation) and with self-justification (which minimized the participant's agency and impact), assessing how these conditions influenced responses in relation to the victim and to the divine. Repentance involved owning responsibility for the wrongdoing while transforming negative behaviors and habits to develop a positive new response that will prevent offending again. Repentance-writing significantly decreased self-condemnation and regret while increasing conciliatory motivations toward the victim (i.e. of apology, restitution, and forgiveness-seeking). By contrast, participants who wrote with offense rumination showed more self-condemning isolation from the victim and God. When self-justifying, participants reported reduced remorse and self-condemnation, while exaggerating perceptions of divine forgiveness; this suggested that merely letting oneself off the hook may have been less aversive, but it lacked the transformative power of repentance. Another discovery was that merely ruminating about one's wrongdoing did not facilitate repentance. Offense rumination not only produced greater

self-condemnation, but also less motivation to apologize, make restitution, and seek forgiveness than did repentance.

Further imagery research has considered the importance of repentance in studying forgiveness-oriented responses from the transgressor's perspective. In the first psychophysiology paradigm, Witvliet, Ludwig, and Bauer (2002) found that imagery of seeking and receiving forgiveness from one's victim prompted perceptions of being more forgiven by the victim, along with more positive emotion, less negative and aroused emotion, and less tension at the brow muscle. The repentant response of forgiveness-seeking also activated increased self-forgiveness (Witvliet et al., 2002).

A more recent investigation of the transgressor's perspective compared offense rumination to responses rooted in humble repentance: imagery of repentant forgiveness-seeking (with a begrudged or forgiven response from one's victim) as well as self-forgiveness (da Silva, Witvliet, & Riek, 2017). Self-forgiveness and receiving other-forgiveness prompted the same cardiac and affective response patterns. Specifically, self-forgiveness and imagining receiving forgiveness from one's victim decreased guilt, negative emotion, and heart rate, while they increased perceived control and positive emotion. Ruminating about one's own wrongdoing impaired participants' cardiac parasympathetic response, important in self-regulation. Thus, the cardiac emotion regulation response has been found to be impaired both by ruminating about one's own wrongdoing (da Silva et al., 2017) and by ruminating about being the victim of someone else's transgression (Witvliet et al., 2010, Witvliet, Hinman et al. 2011). Consistent with da Silva et al. (2017), an independent research group's study of romantic partners found that imagining being granted forgiveness resulted in greater empathy whereas imagining being denied forgiveness led to more anger (Jennings et al., 2016).

Applications

The psychological research literature addressing unforgiveness emerged out of a keen awareness that interpersonal wrongs hurt relationships and emotions. Because psychology has long focused on alleviating suffering, psychologists paid therapeutic and research attention to understanding and addressing these relational wrongs and emotional hurts. Although individuals may already be relatively high or low regarding the tendency to forgive (trait forgivingness), the state of granting forgiveness can be cultivated. Particular conditions that have been found to foster forgiveness—along with a more prosocial orientation, up-regulated positive emotions, down-regulated negative emotions, and less stress reactivity compared to ruminating about transgression—can be applied by clinicians and by individuals beyond the controlled research environment.

Application: Forgiving Within Therapy

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) equipped therapists to use the process model of forgiveness with clients who desire to overcome their anger through forgiving their offender. The authors observe that people are often motivated to forgive for many different reasons, ranging from forgiveness only after the offender is punished or makes appropriate restitution, to granting forgiveness unconditionally as a way to give moral love.

The Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) model for applied forgiveness work in therapy has 20 specific elements that are grouped within four therapy phases. In the *uncovering phase*, clients go through many steps to become aware, understand, and develop insights about the offense and how it is connected to their psychological responses. Next is the *decision phase* in which the client undergoes change and becomes willing and committed to grant forgiveness to the offender. During the *work phase*, the client reappraises the wrongdoer and cultivates empathy and compassion toward the offender. This is the pivot point at which the client extends moral love to the transgressor. Finally, in the *deepening phase*, the client develops a sense of meaning, insight, and realization that connects one's own need for forgiveness to the process of granting forgiveness; experiences a sense of purpose and connection; and moves away from negative and toward positive affect. Clinicians are encouraged to consult Enright and Fitzgibbons' (2000) book on how forgiveness can be pursued within therapy with people who have depressive, bipolar, anxiety, substance, eating, and other disorders. The authors also specifically address forgiveness applications in marriage and family relationships, and with children and adolescents.

Application: Granting Forgiveness Through the REACH Model

Research studies and clinical applications undergird Worthington's (2001, 2003) REACH model of granting forgiveness, which has been tested in groups and is also used by individuals on their own. Worthington guides people who want to forgive, noting that those who forgive to *give* (i.e. pursuing a moral response) have been found to benefit even more than those who pursue forgiveness with the goal of getting those benefits (i.e. pursuing side effects). Thus, his model accentuates the cultivation of empathy and altruistic giving of forgiveness. Beyond the overview of Worthington's approach provided here, we recommend his books to interested readers (see Worthington, 2001 for a broad readership, and Worthington, 2003 for readers with a worldview shaped by Christianity).

R *Recall the hurt.* Worthington noted that how we recall the offense matters. Insofar as our recollections seek to understand, it is possible to remember the offense and its implications in a way that does not fuel revenge but rather moves in the direction of empathic perspective-taking.

- E** *Empathize.* Worthington observed that minimally, having empathy means seeking to understand the perspective of the other person, in this case the offender. A further degree of empathy may involve identifying emotionally with the person responsible for the offense. Worthington described that forgiveness is facilitated by an even deeper level of empathy in which the wounded person develops compassion for the wrongdoer. In this way the moral love emphasized by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) also resonates with the empathy and compassion in Worthington's (2001) model and through the empirical tests of empathy and compassion practices described above (Witvliet et al., 2001, 2010; Witvliet, DeYoung et al., 2011; Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015).
- A** *Altruistic gift of forgiveness.* Worthington (2001) observed empirically that people who developed empathy for the offender more likely forgave the offender, but not always. Another element was needed: taking the step to give forgiveness. Such generosity, Worthington (2001) noted, emerged more naturally when people were humbly aware of their own need for forgiveness and grateful for receiving forgiveness from God and from others. Both humility and gratitude facilitate giving to others out of the abundance of received forgiveness.
- C** *Commit publicly to forgive.* Worthington (2001) advocated telling another trustworthy person about the decision to grant forgiveness as a way of holding oneself accountable. In situations where it is not possible to identify a safe witness, it is important to memorably declare—in writing or aloud to oneself—the commitment to grant forgiveness to the person responsible for the transgression.
- H** *Hold on to forgiveness.* With a keen awareness of how memories are triggered, Worthington (2001) identified the importance of developing individually tailored strategies to actively resist the return of unforgiving ruminations. Specific insights can facilitate holding onto forgiveness. For example, Worthington noted that experiencing pain when remembering a hurtful offense is not the same as unforgiveness. Further, it is important to acknowledge, but not dwell on, one's negative emotions. If the forgiver has committed to forgive alone or with a witness, remembering that commitment and seeking support are helpful strategies. Finally, working through the REACH steps again can strengthen the moral muscles used to grant forgiveness.

Application: Empathy and Granting Forgiveness

As summarized above, Witvliet et al.'s (2001) brief, repeated inductions of empathy and granting forgiveness (versus transgression rumination and grudge-holding) prompted the intended increases in empathy and forgiveness, with broad effects of down-regulating negative and aroused emotion with associated stress responses. Simultaneously, empathy and forgiving imagery up-regulated

positive emotion and perceptions of control. What did participants do to prompt empathy and forgiveness? To activate empathy, they focused on the human qualities of the person who hurt them and recognized their own capacity to hurt others (even unintentionally). To engage in a response of letting go and forgiving, participants focused on *releasing* their negative feelings of hurt and revenge. They considered giving a gift of mercy to the offender and wishing that person well, even in a very small way. For both imagery conditions, participants actively engaged their thoughts, feelings, and physical responses. The brief scripts used in this study (see Appendix) may help facilitate the empathy and decisional forgiveness emphasized by both Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) and Worthington (2001, 2003).

Application: Cultivating Compassion and Forgiving

One way to cultivate compassion is to prompt people to re-think their response to the offender (Baker et al., 2017; Witvliet et al., 2010; Witvliet, DeYoung et al., 2011; Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015). As noted above, this necessitates telling the truth about the offender's humanity and the transgression. The offender is a human being who behaved badly, which resulted in a wound. Next, recognizing an offender's humanity helps the victim see the offender's behavior as evidence that he or she needs to experience a positive transformation. The victim then can be invited to try to genuinely wish that this person will undergo a positive or healing experience or change, even if the relationship cannot or should not be restored. Even if it is difficult, it is possible to see the humanity of the offender, the blameworthiness of the offense, and the change that one can desire for the offender—focusing one's thoughts and feelings on giving a genuine gift of mercy or compassion (see Appendix for specific directions).

Application: Benefit-Focused Reappraisal to Find Treasure in the Dirt

Some people who want to forgive may have difficulty cultivating compassion for a wrongdoer while their emotions are running hot; it may seem objectionable to generate generosity toward the wrongdoer. Yet, for those who desire to begin moving in the direction of forgiveness, identifying benefits even in the hardship is also associated with increases in forgiveness and positive effects on well-being (Baker et al., 2017; McCullough et al., 2006; Witvliet et al., 2010). This approach emphasizes what one has personally gained through facing the painful offense (see specific prompts to facilitate benefit-finding in the Appendix).

At the outset, we wish to make clear that benefit-focused reappraisal does not diminish the wrongdoing or its harmful effects (nor does it restore a person to his or her prior role). Far from being a saccharine or masochistic response, a benefit-focused response holds in tension the truth about the offense and

its effects and the valuable lessons one has learned through facing the offense (e.g. recognizing personal strengths and relational supports). Benefit-finding can equip and empower the victim to tell more of the truth, not less—to see the good in addition to the bad in the transgression or post-transgression situation. In doing so, we suggest that benefit-focused reappraisal may begin to build a forgiving bridge across the injustice gap from the perspective of the victim, whereas compassion-focused reappraisal reaches across the gap to begin bridge-building from the perspective of the offender.

McCullough et al. (2006) tested the first benefit-finding writing intervention in response to an interpersonal offense. They prompted participants to write about *positive* aspects of facing the interpersonal offense. These included awareness of positive outcomes, awareness of personal strengths, the strengthening of a relationship, or becoming a stronger or wiser person. McCullough et al. (2006) discovered that participants who devoted 20 minutes to writing about benefits they had experienced through facing the transgression became significantly more forgiving of the offender compared to participants who either wrote about the transgression's traumatic features or a control condition. Based on this writing intervention, Witvliet et al. (2010) developed an imagery practice for benefit-focused reappraisal, and Baker et al. (2017) further tested this induction. Both studies specifically compared the effects of benefit-focused to compassion-focused reappraisal, while contrasting them to offense rumination. Strikingly, both the benefit-focused and compassion-focused reappraisal approaches increased forgiveness and gratitude, as well as positive emotion compared to offense rumination. However, compassion-focused reappraisal was more potent in increasing empathy and forgiveness.

Application: Repentance After an Offense

We are not only victims of wrongdoing; we also commit transgressions against others and fail to act in ways that treat others with justice and kindness. Witvliet, Hinman et al.'s (2011) repentance-writing induction was designed to help people to tell the truth and own responsibility for one's wrongdoing (confessing, apologizing, making amends), while emphasizing positive transformation through change (see Appendix for instructions). Indeed, the repentance-writing results dovetail with work by Worthington (2013), in that repentance-writing significantly decreased self-condemnation and regret while increasing conciliatory motivations toward the victim (i.e. apology, restitution, and forgiveness-seeking).

Application: Humble Repentance with Forgiveness-Seeking and Self-Forgiveness

Both forgiveness-seeking and self-forgiveness can be rooted in the transgressor's humble repentance (da Silva et al., 2017). Here, we will focus on

self-forgiveness. This is in part because, as transgressors, we can pursue repentance and take steps to embrace forgiveness, but we cannot control whether the victim's response will be to forgive us or hold a grudge. For a more thorough treatment of the process of overcoming self-condemnation, we direct readers to Worthington (2013).

In da Silva et al.'s (2017) repentant self-forgiveness approach, participants focused on their responsibility for, and regret about, their role in committing the offense. As they looked at their own responsibility for causing hurt and humbly repented, they were invited to embrace mercy and forgiveness for themselves. They imagined embracing this kindness and compassion for themselves as they committed to do what they believe is right. Compared to ruminating about their wrongdoing, this approach to self-forgiveness was associated with down-regulated anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt, and heart rate, along with up-regulated positive emotion and a buffered cardiac regulatory measure (see Appendix for imagery instructions).

Summary and Future Directions

To date, most research attention has been devoted to the topic of forgiving others. An emerging literature has begun to study seeking forgiveness and self-forgiving contingent on repentance. Initial research suggests that seeking forgiveness (rather than ruminating about one's guilt) and receiving forgiveness or reconciling with one's victim (rather than being begrudged) stimulates gratitude, joy, happiness, and associated facial physiology (Witvliet et al., 2002, 2015). When it comes to forgiveness and cardiovascular and stress physiology, people who ruminate about the wrongdoing of others (Witvliet et al., 2010, Witvliet, Hinman et al., 2011) and their own wrongdoing (Witvliet et al., 2015) experience significant impairment in the cardiac vagal response, which is an important regulatory response.

While forgiveness research has largely focused on emotional and physical well-being, the field of positive psychology will benefit by directing increased attention to the effect of forgiveness on relational well-being. We recommend targeted approaches to track the impact of forgiveness as it unfolds within the dyad, both including and beyond married couples. Forgiveness may have implications that extend beyond the relationship in which the offense occurred, and which are culturally contextualized. Expanded attention to cultural factors is warranted. Forgiveness may relieve negative spillover from unresolved hurts that can burden one's other relationships with loved ones, friends, colleagues, and the divine. Such relational outcomes warrant study given that social support is an important buffer protecting mental and physical health.

Another direction for forgiveness research is to target explicitly its relationship to other virtues such as love, humility, courage, gratitude, and hope. Finer distinctions in understanding and measuring happiness, joy, and meaning will illuminate the particular ways in which forgiveness can foster not only episodes

of positive emotion, but enduring and substantive transformations that promote positive growth and flourishing through virtue, with relational, spiritual, psychological, and physical implications.

Forgiveness research has made substantial strides in a short time. As this work continues, we anticipate and invite growing interdisciplinary and cross-cultural awareness in the trait and state questions studied. Given the widespread harm of interpersonal offenses at individual, dyadic, group, and societal levels, a sustained focus on repentant change and forgiveness holds great promise. Continuing to understand and develop interventions to promote relational repair and forgiveness has the potential to equip people involved in relational injustices to respond in ways that promote genuine flourishing for victims, offenders, relationships, and community.

APPENDIX

Prompts to Facilitate Empathy and Forgiveness (Witvliet et al., 2001)

Empathy

Please focus on the human qualities of the person who hurt you. Consider the hurts that person may have experienced at some time, any good qualities that person has, and what it would be like to be in that person's shoes. Remember times when you may have hurt someone, even unintentionally. During your imagery of this situation, actively imagine the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you had or would have as you think about the human qualities of that person.

Forgiveness

Please focus on releasing your negative feelings of hurt and revenge. Consider giving a gift of mercy and wishing that person well, even in a very small way. During your imagery of this situation, actively imagine the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you had or would have as you release the hurt and revenge, and grant forgiveness to this person.

Compassionate Reappraisal

Imagery Script A (Witvliet, Hofelich Mohr et al., 2015)

Now your job is to re-think your response to the offender. For the next 2 minutes, think of the offender as a human being who behaved badly. Even if the relationship cannot be restored, try to genuinely wish that this person

experiences something positive or healing. Even though it may be hard, focus your thoughts and feelings on giving a gift of mercy or compassion.

Imagery Script B (Baker et al., 2017; Witvliet et al., 2010)

For the next 2 minutes, try to think of the offender as a human being whose behavior shows that person's need to experience a positive transformation or healing. Try to give a gift of mercy and genuinely wish that person well. During your imagery, actively focus on the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you cultivate compassion, kindness, and mercy for this person.

Benefit-Focused Reappraisal

Writing Prompt (McCullough et al., 2006)

As you write, we would like for you to write about positive aspects of the experience. In which ways did the thing that this person did to you lead to positive consequences for you? Perhaps you became aware of personal strengths that you did not realize you had, perhaps a relationship became better or stronger as a result, or perhaps you grew or became a stronger or wiser person. Explore these issues as you write. In particular, please try to address the following points: (a) In what ways did the hurtful event that happened to you lead to positive outcomes for you? That is, what personal benefits came out of this experience for you? (b) In what ways has your life become better as a result of the harmful thing that occurred to you? In what ways is your life or the kind of person that you have become better today as a result of the harmful thing that occurred to you? (c) Are there any other additional benefits that you envision coming out of this experience for you—perhaps some time in the future? As you write, really try to “let go” and think deeply about possible benefits that you have gained from this negative event, and possible benefits you might receive in the future. Try not to hold anything back. Be as honest and candid as possible about this event and its positive effects, or potential effects, on your life.

Imagery Script (Baker et al., 2017; Witvliet et al., 2010)

For the next 2 minutes, try to think of your offense as an opportunity to grow, learn, or become stronger. Think of benefits you may have gained from your experience such as self-understanding, insight, or improvement in a relationship. During your imagery, actively focus on the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you think about positive ways you benefited from your experience.

Facilitating Repentance

Writing Prompts (Witvliet, Hinman et al., 2011)

For the next 20 minutes, we would like for you to write an essay about that event, focusing on ways you can acknowledge your role in the offense and develop positive responses to it. As you write, really try to write freely and express your feelings. Try not to hold anything back. Be honest and candid about this event, your humble regret, your desire to make things better, and your intentions to develop positive behaviors that will help cultivate good habits of interacting with others. As you write, please try to address the following points:

- What happened in the instance you identified on the questionnaire? What were its consequences?
- Write in a way that takes responsibility for your actions. What are you responsible for? To whom are you responsible?
- Give an honest expression of being sorry for your actions and how they affected the other person.
- In what ways have you, or could you, realistically make amends for your actions? If it is not possible to make things right for the past situation, then write about what you could do differently next time.
- Write about your commitment to not commit that transgression again and to develop positive habits or behaviors for interacting with others in the future.

Self-Forgiveness

Imagery Prompt (da Silva et al., 2017)

For the next 2 minutes, try to imagine that you felt responsible for, and regret about, your role in committing the offense. Imagine that you felt so humbled and repentant that you wanted to be forgiven, confessed, repented, and committed to do what is right. Imagine that as you look at your own actions of causing hurt and of humbly repenting, that you embrace mercy and forgiveness for yourself. Imagine that you embrace this kindness and compassion for yourself as you commit to do what you believe is right. During your imagery, actively focus on the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you think about fully embracing forgiveness of yourself.

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