



St. Catherine University

From the Selected Works of Jennifer Andrews-Gonzaga, PA-C

Spring 2021

Forgiveness Research

Jennifer Andrews-Gonzaga, *St. Catherine University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/jennifer-andrews-gonzaga/2/>

Forgiveness

Jennifer Andrews Gonzaga

Spiritual Wellness

Forgiveness is a universally admired action, often associated with history's leading spiritual thought leaders, including Jesus Christ, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Siddhartha Gotama. However, research has shown that forgiveness is more than just an admired trait and can be used to overcome hardship and promote mental and physical well-being. This paper explores the latter point and demonstrates that forgiveness is a powerful and potentially necessary tool in recovering from pain and living a rewarding life.

Generally, humans aspire to live a life of purpose and meaning. Meaning in life is usually defined as one's comprehension, purpose, or significance. Research has shown that living with meaning results in positive attributes, including self-esteem, growth, and happiness. However, ruptures of meaning (i.e., violations of one's moral code) are common and often result in mental illness, including depression and anxiety, as well as deteriorating shame and self-esteem. An individual can experience a rupture through both violations experienced by another and one's transgressions towards another. However, such fractures can be overcome by pursuing meaning, which can promote acceptance, gratitude, adjustment, and restoration of well-being. Many individuals can struggle with addressing the rupture. Often, an individual can become stuck in a constant state of rumination - leaving one constantly stuck on the circumstances surrounding the rupture and unable to move ahead to the meaning-making phase (Graham et al., 2017). In this state, forgiveness is a critical step in overcoming hardship and moving on to a rewarding life.

Forgiveness is defined in three elements - letting go of negative responses following an event, acting with positive behaviors towards an offender, and doing such in a reasonable period of time. This definition is contrasted with "unforgiveness," which has primarily negative

impacts, including personalization of the offense, judgment of the violator and others, and a constant state of negative emotions. Even partial or conditional forgiveness has adverse effects - studies even indicating it increases mortality risk. However, forgiveness itself will result in positive attributes that will allow one to heal, including de-personalization of the event(s), the judgment of the action as opposed to the individual, and an eventual state of positive emotions, including love, humility, and empathy (Sandage & Jankowski, 2021).

Ultimately, the benefits of forgiveness will come only from authentic forgiveness. Forgiveness is a “choice you make to give up anger or resentment.” When one forgives, they let go of their negative feelings and choose a higher path or choose to take the “high road.” Bob Enright thinks that forgiveness is more than just choosing the higher path. Enright believes that forgiveness is replacing those bad feelings with positive ones. One can replace these negative feelings with things such as compassion or empathy. It is also helpful trying to understand the person that hurt you (Benedict, 2020).

Achieving forgiveness can happen with three different strategies: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal. All of these strategies require an individual to take the time to be introspective. Interpersonal efforts to forgive come from interaction and guidance from another individual - typically, a clinical professional, family or friend, clergy, or simply a trusted confidant. Intrapersonal strategies are those that come from within one’s own heart, potentially through meditative practices. Transpersonal efforts come from belief in a higher power and reliance on that higher power for guidance and healing. One or all three strategies can all be effective, resulting in the positive attributes of genuine forgiveness discussed above (Recine et al., 2019). Three primary steps have been found helpful in genuinely forgiving.

Research has also shown a three-step process for forgiveness. The first step is claiming your anger. Anger can be used as a tool to gauge when something is not serving you as it should be. Anger can be felt and can be a sign that something is not tolerable. It is essential to experience that anger, understand where it comes from and what it means. Doing this can then allow us to release that anger. Suppressing anger can manifest into heart problems such as heart disease. Anger can also take a significant toll on relationships and our bodies.

The next step is trying to figure out what one learned from the situation. When something ends abruptly or badly, one can feel resentment towards a person, group, or condition. People tend to dwell on what happened and focus on what they could have done differently to get a different result. This can lead to us feeling stuck because there is no satisfaction in whatever conclusion there is. When in reality, trying to figure out what you learned from the situation is more beneficial.

The third step discussed is to clarify your values. When someone betrays us, our boundaries and expectations are completely disrupted. After this happens, it is essential to remind ourselves what we will accept and what we will not. People often think that the people we surround ourselves with feel the same way that we do. When in fact, everyone has different kinds of expectations and values. When we clarify our values and accept that not everyone thinks the same way we do, we can address the problem and allude misunderstandings (Well, 2021).

Although research has shown the various positive aspects of forgiveness, the concept of differentiation of self (DoS) is considered a precursor to the positive aspects of forgiveness or a state of mind that makes forgiveness more likely. Achievement of DoS can be both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Intrapersonal DoS is the lessening of one's emotional reactivity and the ability

to self-regulate reactivity, which allows one to relate to others. Interpersonal DoS is the ability to maintain a sense of self while engaging with others. Often, DoS is found in individuals with a distinct sense of spirituality, with spiritual maturity potentially opening one up to the possibility of forgiveness.

Scholars have studied the relationship between DoS and forgiveness by reviewing those that have achieved DoS or not, the relationship between spiritual instability, mental health issues, and positive health improvements. Statistical evidence indicated that DoS, at a minimum, made genuine forgiveness more achievable and, ideally, served as a precursor for forgiveness and its positive attributes to well being (Sandage & Jankowski, 2021)

Although not as well researched as forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness has been shown to have comparable benefits. Self-forgiveness of one's transgressions is a vehicle to assist in finding meaning in life. To guide one towards purpose, self-forgiveness must be authentic and must be coupled with an individual's efforts to seek forgiveness and ensure that transgressions will not happen in the future.

When an individual has violated his or her code, one has two options - to ignore the transgression or to pursue meaning in life, with self-forgiveness as a foundation. There is ample evidence that one's ignorance of a prior offense can often lead to disruptive behaviors in the future and limit one's ability to find meaning in life. However, if one chooses to pursue meaning in life, one can recover from the transgression and strengthen his or her sense of purpose.

Self-forgiveness is difficult, as an individual will need to overcome negative views of oneself and develop positive outcomes from a life-changing action. The process is quite stressful and requires significant work. However, it will be pretty rewarding, as completing the self-forgiveness process can allow an individual to be comfortable within and establish new meaning

or affirm one's prior attributes of importance. Note, however, that self-forgiveness requires powerful rumination, as only genuine self-forgiveness will have positive life effects. To be authentic, one must accept responsibility and seek to make amends. Finally, upon self-forgiveness, one can find a restored sense of purpose, eventually leading to better mental and physical health and stability. It may also result in increased levels of compassion, empathy, and self-love (Sandage & Jankowski, 2021).

Clinicians have the opportunity to assist patients in healing from traumatic events, and research has given professionals tools to instigate the forgiveness process and guide patients thoroughly through the process (Recine et al., 2019). As examples, clinicians can:

- Identify beliefs that may hinder or help “letting go (Recine et al., 2019),”
- Help the patient identify and explore feelings of resentment and anger (Recine et al., 2019).
- Assist patients in resolution, even through spiritual practices (Recine et al., 2019).
- Guide the patient through the healing process through education, discussion, and use of other professionals (Recine et al., 2019).

My personal experience with forgiveness is that it is a daily choice I make. I suffered a deep betrayal, and by healing myself and working on my pain, I was able to come to the point of forgiveness. As I recovered, the pain lessened, and forgiveness was easier. Because ultimately, reaching forgiveness didn't have anything to do with the person that hurt me. It was the work I did and continue to do to find an inner peace that has allowed me to move forward. As I healed myself, all of the stressors that came with my trauma started to fade away, and forgiveness was easier.

Works Cited

Benedict, F. (2020, August 21). *Vitamin "F": Forgiveness-and the Power of Letting Go*. Chopra. <https://chopra.com/articles/vitamin-f-forgiveness-and-the-power-of-letting-go>.

Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It. Johns Hopkins Medicine. (2021). <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it>.

Graham, K. L., Steger, M. F., O'Donnell, M. B., & Morse, J. L. (2017). *Repairing Meaning, Resolving Rumination, and Moving toward Self-Forgiveness*.

Millington, C., & Gowmon, V. (2019, March 26). *Taking Time to Feel Authentic Forgiveness: Healing in a Culture of Quick-fix Solutions and Spiritual Bypassing*. Vince Gowmon. <https://www.vincegowmon.com/taking-time-to-feel-authentic-forgiveness/>.

Recine, A. G., Recine, L., & Paldon, T. (2019). *How People Forgive*.

Silver, V. (2009). *What is Forgiveness and Why is It Important?* Holistic MindBody Healing. <https://www.holistic-mindbody-healing.com/what-is-forgiveness.html>.

Well, T. (2021). *Forgiveness is a Gift of Clarity to Yourself*. Psychology Today . <https://www.holistic-mindbody-healing.com/what-is-forgiveness.html>.