Forgiveness IV: Self-Forgiveness

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An Overview of Self-Forgiveness.

As these offerings from two of the world’s great religious traditions suggest, perspectives similar to self-forgiveness and its role in shaping our relationship to the world around us have long been part of the world’s spiritual heritage. However it has only been recently that the issue of self-forgiveness has caught the attention of the field of Psychology. In 2005, Hall and Fincham published a survey of the literature on self-forgiveness to date. Calling self-forgiveness “the stepchild of forgiveness research,” they lament the lack of empirical studies completed by that date in contrast to the large body of literature on interpersonal forgiveness. They offer a thorough overview of the topic of self-forgiveness, noting that definitions of self-forgiveness vary somewhat in their inclusion or exclusion of the following elements. Self-forgiveness:

- Is based on the recognition of, and acceptance of responsibility for, an objective transgression or fault of one’s own that may be directed either towards another or towards oneself.
- Can also possibly be applied towards a personal character flaw as opposed to a discrete action.
- Evokes “self-love and respect in the face of one’s own wrongdoing.”
- Results in the reduction or elimination of self-hatred or self-contempt.
- Includes the recognition of one’s own “intrinsic worth and its independence from his/her wrongdoing.”
- Involves a shift from estrangement from oneself to a stance of self-acceptance.
- Leads to a decrease in behavior of retaliation against oneself, which is replaced by greater self-directed benevolent behavior.
- Is a process that includes conscious effort undertaken intentionally.
- In contrast to interpersonal forgiveness, which, from a psychological perspective need not involve reconciliation with the offender, necessarily includes a reconciliation with oneself.

The authors suggest that the process of self-forgiveness may differ depending on the whether the victim of the behavior is another or oneself. However in an interesting counterpoint, psychologist and author of Buddha’s Brain, Rick Hanson, describes self-forgiveness in terms of the relationship between different subpersonalities within each of us. Perhaps with this view of intrapersonal dynamics in mind, the differences might not seem so great. To read Hanson’s article, which includes a useful self-forgiveness exercise, go to "The Art of Self-Forgiveness."

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As of this 2005 survey, there were no self-forgiveness interventions that had been empirically passed the evidence-based test. The problem at that time was the lack of a validated self-forgiveness measurement tool. This was especially true for measuring self-forgiveness in relation to a specific transgression, or state self-forgiveness as opposed to trait self-forgiveness. In addition, given the authors’ view that self-forgiveness is a process, they note the need for a state self-forgiveness instrument that, rather than simply being black and white (forgive or didn’t forgive), can assess the shades of gray on the way to self-forgiveness.


Self-Forgiveness and Mental Health Outcomes

Since the completion of Hall and Fincham’s literature review in 2005, additional research has added to the understanding of self-forgiveness in several areas. These include the mental health benefits of self-forgiveness, the process of self-forgiveness and factors that mediate self-forgiveness.

Evidence for the mental health benefits of self-forgiveness is growing. In her dissertation, Avery compared self-forgiveness to forgiveness of others, empathy and religiosity. Completed in 2008, the results of her study of 95 university students found that self-forgiveness had significantly more impact than the three other variables when related to mental health, general health, and social functioning. (Avery CM (2008) The relationship between self-forgiveness and health: Mediating variables and implications for well-being. University of Hartford.) Research by Romero et al. (2005) with women suffering from breast cancer found that those with a self-forgiving attitude and strong spirituality enjoyed better quality of life and were less likely to suffer. (Romero C, Friedman LC,


In another 2010 study with a behavioral focus, Wohl et al. showed that self-forgiveness for procrastination reduces the likelihood of procrastination in a similar future situation. (Wohl MJ, Pychyl TA, Bennett SH (2010) I forgive myself, now I can study: How self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination. Personality and Individual Differences 48: 803–808. As research has begun to show, self-forgiveness has many potential mental health benefits. However the picture is not completely rosy. See the “self-forgiveness” section of Lesson VIII for some examples of situations where self-forgiveness may be detrimental to well-being.

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- "living with the past: self-forgiven, yet always present.
- "liberating self-forgiveness.
- "mindful self-compassion handouts.
- "mindful self-compassion meditations.
- "living buddha, living christ.
- "the son of a rabbi went to worship on the sabbath in a nearby town.
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A 2010 study by Webb et al. looked at the relationship of dispositional forgiveness and self-forgiveness among 140 adults who had suffered spinal cord injuries. While forgiveness of others was more strongly associated with overall health status, self-forgiveness outperformed forgiveness of others regarding health promoting behaviors and life satisfaction. Webb JR, Toussaint L, Kalpakjian CZ, Tate DG (2010). *Forgiveness and health-related outcomes among people with spinal cord injury.* Disabil Rehabil 32 (5):360-6.

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