Forgiveness IV: Self-Forgiveness

Our capacity to make peace with another person and the world, depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves.

Thich Nhat Hanh in Living Buddha, Living Christ

The son of a Rabbi went to worship on the Sabbath in a nearby town. On his return, his family asked, ‘Well, did they do anything different from what we do here?’ ‘Yes, of course,’ said the son. ‘Then what was the lesson?’ ‘Love thy enemy as thy self.’ ‘So, it’s the same as we say. So how is it that you learned something else?’ ‘They taught me to love the enemy within myself.’

Jewish Teaching Story

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:

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- 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 MJJ, 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.

The Process of Self-Forgiveness

To test their hypothesis that self-forgiveness after an interpersonal transgression is a process, Hall and Fincham studied 148 subjects during the 7 weeks following such an offense. In this 2008 study, they worked with university students who self-identified as having committed a relatively mild offense (e.g., lying or breaking a promise). No self-forgiveness intervention was involved. Using statistical analysis of weekly e-mail self-reports tracking a multiplicity of variables, they concluded that there was a natural tendency for self-forgiveness to increase in a roughly linear fashion over the seven-week period following the offense. (Hall JH, Fincham FD (2008). The temporal course of self-forgiveness. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 27 (2): 174–202.

Another study utilized a qualitative, interview methodology to examine the process leading to self-forgiveness. Kirshenbaum studied eight psychotherapy clients who had undergone experiences of self-forgiveness during therapy. While the experience of self-forgiveness was quite profound according to participant reports, no underlying universal process or pattern leading to self-forgiveness emerged from the data. (Kirshenbaum SL (2008). Self-forgiveness in psychotherapy: A qualitative analysis, University of Denver.)

The Religious Dimension of Self-Forgiveness

Several research projects have explored the religious dimension of self-forgiveness. In one 2007 study, Beiter in his dissertation research used an in-depth narrative phenomenological approach. Interviewing subjects who reported having had a self-forgiveness experience, he found that “self-forgiveness seems to pivot on the suspension of the belief in, or appropriation of the right to, an eye-for-an-eye retribution toward self (or other).” Those who could let go of this Old Testament perspective found it easier to forgive themselves. (Beiter JW (2007). Self-forgiveness: A narrative analysis, Duquesne University.)

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Research on self-forgiveness interventions remains in its early stages. However a few studies have found their way into the literature. In her 2007 dissertation, Fisher worked with college students who had committed an interpersonal transgression within the past two months. One group was given an online self-forgiveness intervention in the form of a workbook in four sections entitled as follows: “Your Role in the Situation,” “Dealing with Shame,” “Making Peace with the Situation,” and “Releasing Negative Feelings.” The workbook was self-paced with one exception. Between the first and second parts of the “Making Peace with the Situation” section, there was a one week gap to allow for the possibility that participants might choose to make amends for their transgression. The workbook group scored significantly higher than the control group for reduced defensiveness and remorse regarding their offense. They trended towards increased self-forgiveness and reduced shame while they were also more likely to apologize. (Fisher ML (2007) . Evaluation of self-forgiveness intervention: Does it promote emotion resolution and prosocial behavior? Case Western Reserve University.)

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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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Laura Toce Nimchek’s dissertation on self-forgiveness and depression offers a group cognitive therapy-based treatment manual for self-forgiveness designed for Christian women. See Nimchek LT (2007) Self-forgiveness in Christian women: A group therapy...
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