

Review

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Forgiveness and flourishing

Research and education

Vergebung und gelingendes Leben Forschung und Bildung

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Abstract: This article reviews work that my colleagues and I have conducted over the past 20 years examining connections of forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness with flourishing. I also highlight our work investigating psychoeducational approaches to forgiveness education. Definitions of forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, divine forgiveness, and flourishing are offered at the outset. Then I turn to considering conceptual models of the forgiveness and flourishing connection. I review both the stress-and-coping models of forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness, and suggest that these models offer a lens on how and why forgiveness might be connected to flourishing. Examples of research testing different aspects of these models are then offered with an eye toward understanding both the direct and mediating/moderating influence of forgiveness and self-forgiveness on flourishing. Forgiveness education is discussed next. Here I review leading methods of forgiveness education (i. e., REACH Forgiveness and Forgive for Good) and review both the steps of each model and provide examples of the efficacy trials that have been done to demonstrate that forgiveness is a teachable skill when appropriate methods are used. I conclude by summarizing what I have learned about forgiveness and suggest some areas of science and society in need of future forgiveness work.

Keywords: forgiveness, flourishing

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über Forschungsarbeit, die meine Kollegen/Kolleginnen und ich in den letzten 20 Jahren unternommen haben,

um Verbindungen zwischen Vergebung für andere und Selbst-Vergebung mit gelingendem Leben (*flourishing*) zu untersuchen. Ich stelle zudem Arbeit vor, in der wir psychosoziale Ansätze in der Erziehung zur Vergebung untersucht haben. Zu Beginn werden Definitionen von Vergebung für andere, Selbst-Vergebung, göttlicher Vergebung und gelingendem Leben (*flourishing*) gegeben. Dann widme ich mich konzeptuellen Modellen der Verbindung von Vergebung und gelingendem Leben (*flourishing*). Ich gebe einen Überblick über das Stress-und-Coping-Modell sowohl von Vergebung für andere als auch für Selbstvergebung und deute an, dass diese Modelle einen Zugang dazu eröffnen, wie und warum ein Zusammenhang zwischen Vergebung und gelingendem Leben (*flourishing*) bestehen könnte. Es werden Beispiele aus der Forschung angeführt, die ein Verständnis sowohl für den unmittelbaren als auch den vermittelten/mäßigenden Einfluss von Vergebung und Selbstvergebung auf gelingendes Leben (*flourishing*) bieten. Eine Diskussion der Erziehung zur Vergebung schließt sich an. Ich gebe einen Überblick über führende Methoden der Vergebungserziehung (z. B. REACH Forgiveness und Forgive for Good) und über die Schritte der betreffenden Modelle und gebe Beispiele für die Effektivitätsuntersuchungen, die durchgeführt wurden, um nachzuweisen, dass Vergebung eine erlernbare Fertigkeit ist, solange angemessene Methoden zum Einsatz kommen. Ich schließe mit einer Zusammenfassung dessen, was ich über Vergebung gelernt habe, und deute einige Bereiche in Forschung und Gesellschaft an, in denen weitere Arbeit zum Thema Vergebung erforderlich wäre.

Schlüsselwörter: Vergebung, gelingendes Leben

It is both a pleasure and honor to be invited to review some of the research and education that we have completed over the past 20 years on forgiveness and flourishing. Although I am the sole author of this piece, the work is the product

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of the collaborations of many wonderful colleagues, many of whom have now become friends. I am immensely grateful for the mentorship, support, and contributions from so many of my partners in this work. What I review herein would not have been possible without them.

I would like to take the opportunity in this paper to review a couple of key areas of our work and perhaps suggest a few additional lines of inquiry and education. An important beginning is the definition and conceptualization of both forgiveness and flourishing. From there, our research examining the relationships between forgiveness and flourishing will be reviewed, focusing on forgiveness and mental and physical health. Next, we'll review some of our forgiveness education efforts. Finally, we'll draw some conclusions and consider potential future work.

Defining forgiveness and flourishing

Forgiveness is a multidimensional construct (Toussaint et al. 2015a). The first dimension of forgiveness is forgiveness of others and it is commonly defined as the replacement of negative thoughts, feelings, and motivations directed at an offender with positive ones (McCullough et al. 1998). Forgiveness is an undeserved, altruistic gift that is freely offered to an offender that also has benefits for the victim. Although it is commonly confused with condoning, excusing, denying, or justifying an offense, forgiveness is unique and should not be thought of as any of these things (Enright & North 1998). Furthermore, forgiveness is often mistaken for reconciliation or lack of justice (Luskin 2002). These are also misconceptions as forgiveness, even though it might facilitate it, does not require reconciliation, that is, relationship repair. And, as forgiveness is an entirely intrapersonal process, it should not be conflated with justice which is a process that takes place in the social world and as a function of a specific, often culturally bound, legal system (Toussaint & Waldman 2017; Toussaint & Waldman 2019). Forgiveness can be thought of as a decision, but it can also be an emotion (Cavalcanti et al. 2019; Worthington 2020a). Forgiveness can be regarded as a process that unfolds over time and in relation to a specific offense, or it can be conceptualized as a trait or virtue that is formed as part of one's character (Worthington 2022).

A second dimension of forgiveness is that of self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness is important because it provides a healthy response to self-condemnation (e. g., self-blame, loathing, rumination) resulting from having done harm to either oneself or others (Worthington 2013; Woodyatt et al.

2017). Self-forgiveness can therefore be conceived of as a releasing of negative thoughts, feelings, and motivations directed at oneself and a replacement of these with more positive, love-based, and compassionate ones (Webb et al. 2017). Self-forgiveness, however, is quite different from forgiveness of others because the offender and victim are one in the same. As such, there is a risk that an individual acts in hurtful ways and then skips out on repairing the damage in a hasty and short-circuited attempt to simply feel better. Some have called this offering oneself "cheap grace" (Murphy 2003). Genuine self-forgiveness must include some component of remorse, apology, and amends-making which can only subsequently be followed by restoration of one's self esteem and personal values through self-forgiveness (Wenzel et al. 2012; Worthington 2013). Absent these prerequisites, self-forgiveness may be little more than simple narcissism masquerading as self-help or -love (Woodyatt et al. 2017).

Finally, a third dimension of forgiveness is that of divine forgiveness. Far less often studied in comparison to the other dimensions of forgiveness, divine forgiveness is the belief that the divine has forgiven one's sins (Fincham 2020). This belief can be in regard to how often or how strongly one agrees that divine forgiveness has been offered (Fincham & May 2019). Divine forgiveness grows out of religious and spiritual traditions where belief in a forgiving divine entity is central to the faith. Consequently, divine forgiveness may vary in perception or experience based on faith beliefs and traditions (Toussaint & Williams 2008).

The notion of flourishing is as equally multifaceted as forgiveness. Flourishing can be thought of broadly as the experience of good mental and physical health combined with high levels of happiness (Toussaint et al. 2022). Others have defined flourishing even more comprehensively to include not only health and happiness but also such things as a sense of meaning and purpose, educational attainment, and sufficient income and resources (VanderWeele 2017; VanderWeele et al. 2019; Stiefel et al. 2020). Still others have argued that flourishing requires positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman 2011). Our present consideration will focus on the components, common to several definitions, wherein flourishing is comprised of mental and physical health and happiness.

Conceptual models of forgiveness and flourishing

Two key models have directed our work connecting forgiveness and flourishing. These are the stress-and-coping models of forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer 2004; Strelan 2020) and self-forgiveness (Toussaint et al. 2017). Both of these models are grounded in Lazarus' (1999) stress-and-coping theory. According to this theory, stress is a dynamic and multifaceted process that begins with the experience of an event that is cognitively appraised as a threat (primary appraisal). This is followed by another cognitive assessment (secondary appraisal) of one's ability to meet the threat of the event successfully and cope with the challenges present in the environment. Ultimately the primary and secondary appraisal processes give rise to an attempt at coping with the stressful event and adjusting accordingly to the demands of the environment.

The stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness takes an interpersonal offense as the initial event that is deemed threatening. The offense is appraised as threatening (primary appraisal). This creates a state of unforgiveness which is a combination of negative emotions directed at the offender and often includes hatred, blame, anger, bitterness, etc. Although there are a multitude of potential responses to the offense that might be considered (secondary appraisal), forgiveness is conceptualized as a positive and productive coping response to having been hurt by another person. Forgiveness is further conceptualized as an emotion-focused coping response that may buffer or mediate the detrimental effects of unforgiveness on human flourishing.

Likewise, the stress-and-coping model of self-forgiveness is similarly positioned within the framework of Lazarus' (1999) theory. In this model the source of offense is intrapersonal in nature and results from the harmful effects of one's actions on oneself or others. Recognition of the harm one has done results in a myriad of negative emotions and cognitions directed toward oneself such as self-blame, guilt, rumination, and self-loathing, to name a few, and is known as self-condemnation. In response to self-condemnation one could choose several options for coping. For instance, self-worth could be lowered, feelings of embarrassment could swell, or denial could be used to keep the reality of the pain that was caused at bay. Self-forgiveness is also an option in this circumstance and is thought to, like forgiveness of others, either buffer or mediate the detrimental connections between self-condemnation and human flourishing.

Model testing

Much of my work has been focused on using the stress-and-coping models of forgiveness and self-forgiveness to guide empirical tests of: 1) how forgiveness and self-forgiveness are directly connected to health as a key component of flourishing, and 2) how forgiveness and self-forgiveness might serve as coping mechanisms that moderate or mediate connections of unforgiveness and self-condemnation with aspects of flourishing (e. g., mental and physical health and well-being).

Connections of forgiveness and self-forgiveness with mental and physical health

We have identified several interesting findings in our work examining the direct connections between forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness with key aspects of flourishing—mental and physical health and happiness. In one study data was collected on forgiveness and self-forgiveness, as well as, psychological distress, life satisfaction, and self-reported physical health (Toussaint et al. 2001). These data were collected from a nationally representative sample of over 1400 U.S. adults. Results showed that forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness were beneficially related to psychological distress, life-satisfaction, and self-reported health, but these associations varied by age group. Self-forgiveness appeared to be more beneficial to younger adults' (ages 18–44 years of age) life-satisfaction and self-reported physical health, whereas, forgiveness of others was more critical for older adults' (65 or more years of age) benefit on these same outcomes.

A second study examined sex differences in associations of forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness with a 12-month screening diagnosis of depression (Toussaint et al. 2008). Based on theories of sex differences in intrapersonal and interpersonal orientations, we predicted that self-forgiveness would be more important as a predictor of males' depression risk and that forgiveness of others would be more important for females' depression risk. This data was again collected in a nationally representative sample of over 1400 U.S. adults. Results showed that forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness were both important in reducing females' depression risk, but only self-forgiveness was effective in reducing males' risk, partially confirming our hypotheses.

A third example of the work we have done examined the direct connections between unforgiveness and 12-month screening diagnoses of several mental illnesses in a nationally representative sample of over 43 000 U.S.

adults (Toussaint & Cheadle 2009). In this study we found that tendencies toward unforgiveness and social problems resulting from unforgiveness were related to two to three times increased risk of several different psychiatric illnesses including major depression, dysthymia, generalized anxiety, agoraphobia, social phobia, and antisocial personality disorder.

Forgiveness and self-forgiveness as coping mechanisms

Several of our studies have aimed to understand how forgiveness and self-forgiveness might act as mediators and/or moderators of the connections between intra- and inter-personal stress and negative emotion and flourishing. One of these studies examined lifetime stress, trait forgiveness, and depressive symptoms in a sample of almost 150 college students (Toussaint et al. 2016a). In this study we were curious about whether forgiveness of others was capable of moderating the robust and well-known association of stress with depressive symptoms. Results showed that, as expected, both stress (positively) and forgiveness (negatively) were related to depressive symptoms, but more interestingly, we found that the association between stress and depressive symptoms was moderated by forgiveness of others. That is, for those with low and even moderate levels of trait forgiveness of others, the association between stress and depressive symptoms was present in its usual moderate magnitude and positive direction. However, for individuals who possessed high levels of trait forgiveness, the association between stress and depression was completely erased.

In a similarly conceptualized study, we examined self-forgiveness, hostility, and cognitive impairment over a 10-year time span in a representative sample of U.S. adults with an average age of 55 years (Toussaint et al. 2018). In this study we were curious to see if the known deleterious effects of hostility on cognitive function would be abated through self-forgiveness in some way over time. We found that as the sample aged by a decade they naturally showed a statistically significant increase in cognitive impairment and hostility hastened this natural tendency. However, while those with low and moderate self-forgiveness showed this normal and expected pattern, those with high levels of self-forgiveness showed a statistically slower decline in cognitive function. In fact, just as in the study above (Toussaint et al. 2016a) we found that the most self-forgiving individuals showed no connection between hostility and cognitive impairment 10 years later.

One final example of the examination of forgiveness as a coping mechanism is a study that we conducted with over 300 adults of various ages who we assessed five times over the course of five weeks on forgiveness of others, stress, and psychological distress (Toussaint et al. 2016b). In this study we were particularly interested in characterizing changes in forgiveness, stress, and psychological distress over time and how these changes might be interrelated. We found that all three constructs showed changes over time and that reductions in forgiveness were associated with increases in psychological distress. More importantly, we found that reductions in forgiveness were associated with increases in psychological distress, because reductions in forgiveness were associated with increases in stress which were, in turn, associated with increases in psychological distress.

Forgiveness education

Knowing that forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness offer promising benefits for flourishing has motivated me to seek to better understand how to promote forgiveness. In this regard I have used the psychoeducation methods developed by my colleagues Dr. Frederic Luskin and Dr. Everett Worthington.

Luskin's *Forgive for Good* model (Luskin 2002) is comprised of nine steps involving: 1) naming the offense, 2) commitment to feeling better through forgiveness, 3) understanding what forgiveness is and is not, 4) reorienting one's perspective from the past to the present, 5) stress relaxation and deconditioning of thoughts of the offense and anxiety reactions, 6) reframing expectations about control in life, 7) reducing rumination, 8) replacing unforgiving emotions with positive emotions like gratitude, and 9) reframing one's story about an offense from that of a victim to that of a survivor.

Worthington's model (Worthington 2008) is comprised of deciding to forgive and five additional steps to "REACH" Forgiveness. Readyng an individual to decide to forgive begins with remembering past successes in forgiving, followed by reflections on inspirational quotes about forgiveness, finally decisional and emotional forgiveness are delineated. Individuals may or may not be ready to forgive at the outset, but the opportunity to decide to forgive is available throughout the entire educational process. The formal steps of the REACH Forgiveness model entail: 1) recalling the hurt, 2) empathizing with the offender, 3) offering an altruistic gift of forgiveness, 4) committing to forgiveness even if it takes time, and 5) holding on to forgiveness when

challenges arise in the future. The concluding segment of the REACH Forgiveness method involves considering the decision to forgive once again (if the decision has not yet been made) and generalizing the skills of forgiveness from one specific event to a broader approach to living life in a forgiving way.

Both the Forgive for Good and REACH Forgiveness methods have been empirically tested (Toussaint et al. 2020a; Worthington 2020b) and shown to be effective methods for promoting forgiveness which can also have additional benefits for flourishing. Both methods have been widely tested and used for decades with various groups, for example, college students, community adults, community dwelling and patient samples, as well as, samples of individuals from the U.S. and abroad. While each method has its own unique approach to facilitating forgiveness, both methods are accessible, easy to use, follow, and teach, and can be adapted quite easily to a variety of specific needs.

My work using these methods has focused on broadening the reach of forgiveness education. For instance, in 2007 we designed and implemented the Sierra Leone Forgiveness Project to help children and adults at a preparatory school cope with the consequences of a long-fought civil war that had ended just five years prior to launch of our project (Toussaint et al. 2009). We spent a week in Sierra Leone working with teachers and students to implement the Forgive for Good method within the school. Although we were unable to evaluate our work with the children, we did evaluate the work we did with 24 teachers. We found that, as compared to a control group of teachers, teachers who were trained in the Forgive for Good method through the Sierra Leone Forgiveness Program showed higher levels of forgiveness and better flourishing as indicated in higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of stress, negative mood, and depression.

We have also examined a cross-cultural adaptation of the REACH Forgiveness method in India (Toussaint et al. 2020b). Here we implemented a randomized, wait-list, cross-over design with 124 Indian college students. The adapted REACH Forgiveness method was effective in bringing about gains in forgiveness and flourishing, as shown in decreases in unforgiveness, and improvements in positive mood and self-esteem. We also identified theoretically-relevant predictors of treatment response namely spiritual similarity of the offender.

A third example of our research on forgiveness education is a study we conducted that tested the REACH Forgiveness model and the Forgive for Good model in a head-to-head comparison to evaluate the relative effectiveness of the two methods (Toussaint et al. 2020a). In this study

we randomized at total of 99 college students to receive the REACH Forgiveness method, the Forgive for Good method, or a control group who received standard wellness education. Importantly, all forgiveness educational groups were offered by undergraduate leaders. Results of the study showed that both methods proved effective in promoting forgiveness and reducing unforgiveness. Neither method was more or less effective than the other.

What have I learned and where should we go?

Our research, and that of several other investigators, over the last 20 years points to the conclusion that forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness are connected to key aspects of flourishing—namely better mental and physical health and happiness (Toussaint et al. 2015b). These findings have been reported using cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs using college student, population-based, and single- and cross-cultural samples. The connection between forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness with flourishing is meaningful and largely consistent across different studies.

A similar conclusion would be appropriate for the body of literature focused on understanding forgiveness education (Wade et al. 2014). Much work has been done in this regard, and our specific studies highlighted above have been consistent with the larger trends in the field (Wade et al. 2014). That is, teaching forgiveness in psychoeducational formats provides an effective way to help people become more forgiving and often offers additional benefits for improved flourishing. Although studies examining the efficacy of forgiveness education methods have tended to be done in the United States, several efforts have proven fruitful in globalizing forgiveness education and testing the efficacy of these methods more broadly (Toussaint et al. 2009; Toussaint et al. 2020b; Worthington et al. 2020).

Although research on forgiveness and flourishing and forgiveness education has been well-established, there remain many fruitful lines of investigation that should be explored. First, in terms of forgiveness and flourishing studies, more consistent efforts should be made to examine how forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness are connected to flourishing outcomes such as depression, anxiety, happiness, physical health etc., and what mechanisms might explain these associations. The stress-and-coping models of forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness have been useful in guiding these types of studies,

but other models do exist and the diversity of mechanisms under consideration remains relatively limited. For instance, forgiveness may be connected to mental health through a number of neurohormonal, neurophysiological, or psychoneuroimmunological pathways and few of these linkages have been examined (Toussaint et al. 2016a; Toussaint et al. 2016b; Slavich et al. 2019). Might forgiveness reduce adrenaline or cortisol, or increase other hormonal responses such as oxytocin? Could it influence the pathways of inflammation or other immunological responses? Might these mechanisms shed better light on why forgiveness is linked to components of flourishing such as mental and physical health?

Studies of forgiveness and flourishing that focus on physical health could also be improved by considering the role of forgiveness in everyday (e. g., common colds, allergies, etc.) and chronic illness (e. g., heart disease, cancer, chronic pain). If forgiveness offers a means of regulating the stress response, and many minor and chronic illnesses contain an element of vulnerability or exacerbation resulting from stress responding, then forgiveness could be an important coping mechanism to consider. In terms of stress and chronic illness, forgiveness may buffer interpersonal stress and disharmony resulting from interactions with healthcare providers. Forgiveness may be just what the doctor ordered when diagnoses are missed or delayed, when treatment plans are not effective, or when healthcare bureaucracy complicates the receipt, timeliness, or quality of care. The study of patient-provider interactions within healthcare remains a significant area of research in medical psychology and forgiveness might be highly relevant in this context (Offenbächer et al. 2015).

A final suggestion for forgiveness and flourishing studies would be continued improvement of designs, samples, measurement, and analyses. While the study of forgiveness and flourishing continues to evolve, we still lack sufficient longitudinal and experimental studies, diverse samples in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, etc., and sophisticated measurement and analytic approaches (Toussaint et al. 2015a).

Research on forgiveness education also continues to improve, but the crossover of forgiveness education into areas of health, wellness, and healthcare remains limited. Forgiveness education may be well-received by individuals seeking stress-relaxation methods and/or alternative approaches to wellness and the promotion of flourishing. It may dovetail nicely with other alternative and complementary practices such as yoga, guided imagery, and mindfulness. Some patient groups may be especially in need of forgiveness education. For instance, chronic pain patients are often hurt and verbally attacked for their lack of partic-

ipation in society, the vague and mysterious nature of their symptoms, and their inability to completely describe their experience (Offenbächer et al. 2015). In this case, often family members, friends, and even healthcare professionals can be insensitive and naive about the needs of this group and interpersonal offenses are common. Because the nature of offense may be quite unique in these groups, we need more understanding of how best to design forgiveness education for these individuals.

In a similar vein, much forgiveness education research has examined college students in the United States. While the diversity of cultures in which forgiveness education research has been done is increasing rapidly, the field could still use a sustained effort to globalize research on forgiveness education methods. This is especially true for the methods described above that are already known to be efficacious in one culture and could be easily adapted for education in another—REACH Forgiveness and Forgive for Good. It is also important to consider that forgiveness is an issue for all age groups and while much research on forgiveness education has been done in young adults, methods will certainly need adjustment for young children, adolescents, and middle- and older-adults.

Finally, a couple of world events demand the attention of forgiveness educators. The pandemic has brought an overwhelming number of opportunities to be offended or insulted by the actions and beliefs of others. Previously unthinkable divisiveness has grown up around mask-wearing, vaccination, social-distancing, and socio-demographic challenges to equitable healthcare. For many, there is a sense of victimization by circumstance, family, friends, God, or life (Toussaint et al. 2021). Forgiving the perceived offenses of the pandemic and moving on will likely be hard and support through forgiveness education may become crucial. Of course, the war in Ukraine is also relevant to forgiveness education. While current attention is rightfully focused on the fighting, tragedy, and suffering of far too many people, it is hoped that peace will be forthcoming. However, peacebuilding will require attention to justice, potential reconciliation, but also and importantly, forgiveness. We should not be caught off guard in readying ourselves to respond to the need for forgiveness work in rebuilding trust, reconciled communities, and human flourishing in these countries and globally.

The study of connections between forgiveness and flourishing, as well as, how to effectively promote forgiveness continue to be areas of strong interest for many scientists and practitioners. Research has already shown us that forgiveness is important for individual and community flourishing, and we can help people become more forgiving through the use of efficacious psychoeducational

methods. I have been honored and blessed to be part of this work. I look forward to continuing to build the capacity through networks of scientists, counselors, research centers, religious and spiritual organizations, and educational institutions to continue to pursue the understanding of forgiveness and its benefits for human flourishing and the best ways to share this knowledge with others.

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He earned his Ph.D. in 1998. After his postdoctoral trainee experience at the University of Michigan, he served as an assistant professor at Idaho State University for three years (2001–4).