

FORGIVENESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH DEPRESSION

Muhammad Ali^{a*}

^aDepartment of Psychology, Hazara University, Mansehra, Pakistan

*Correspondence to: Mr. Muhammad Ali, PhD Scholar, Department of Psychology, Hazara University, Mansehra, Pakistan. E-mail: muhammadi66110@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between forgiveness and depression delves into the significant role of forgiveness in alleviating depressive symptoms. In this study a literature review spanning a decade of studies highlights the negative correlations between forgiveness and depression, establishing key propositions that suggest that unforgiveness is linked to poor mental health, while forgiveness acts as a beneficial coping strategy. The results reveal that engaging in forgiveness significantly diminishes depressive symptoms, enhances emotional well-being, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and lowers anxiety levels, contributing to an overall improved mental health. By emphasizing the transformative power of forgiveness, this research highlights its potential as a crucial therapeutic tool for enhancing resilience, emotional health, and ultimately leading to a more positive and fulfilling life experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is a conscious process of letting go of negative feelings and replacing them with empathy and goodwill towards someone who has harmed you. There are two types of forgiveness like self-forgiveness that involves forgiving oneself for past mistakes or transgression, which can be crucial for mental health. Interpersonal Forgiveness that pertains to forgiving others, which can alleviate tensions and improve relational dynamics. Depression is a mental health condition that involves a depressed mood or loss of interest in activities for long periods of time. It's different from regular mood changes and feelings about everyday life. Forgiveness can reduce depressive manifestations and is linked to lower levels of depression. Forgiveness can reduce anxiety and hostility. Forgiveness can increase self-esteem and hopefulness for the future. Forgiveness can also improve physical health, including: Lower risk of heart attack, Improved cholesterol levels, Better sleep, Reduced pain, and Lower blood pressure. Forgiveness is a decisional and emotional process. Decisional forgiveness involves replacing ill will with good will, while emotional forgiveness involves moving away from negative feelings (Geis, 2024; Rivera, 2024).

A ten-year assessment of research on the connection between forgiveness and mental health was published by Griffin et al. (2015). He draws the conclusion that there is empirical support for using forgiveness as a strategy to help both victims and offenders of interpersonal violence improve their mental health (Griffin et al., 2015). Negative health consequences have been associated with feeling unforgiven by others. In the United States, older persons' self-rated health and despair are linked to feeling unforgiven by others. Along with gender differences, the possible moderating effects of self-forgiveness and forgiving others in the relationship between unforgiveness and depression and self-rated health were also evaluated. When women feel unforgiven by others, forgiving

oneself and others may be protective of wellbeing. These results add to the body of research on forgiveness and later-life health and have implications for programs that promote forgiveness (Ermer & Proulx, 2016).

Although there is evidence linking a lack of forgiveness to poor mental health, previous research has found conflicting results about the connection between depressed symptoms and a lack of forgiveness. This study looked at the moderating role of self-compassion in an effort to explain the strong variations between depressive symptoms and a lack of forgiving. Self-compassion was found to have a buffering effect when analyzed using moderated multiple regression. In particular, the association between sadness and a lack of forgiveness was mediated by self-compassion; the association was higher for people with low levels of self-compassion (Chung, 2016). As positive psychology has grown, protective variables—such as forgiveness—have drawn more attention as barriers against suicidal thinking and attempts as well as risk factors for suicide. Forgiveness is one of the protective variables linked to depression and suicide, according to empirical data. Studies on gender differences in teenagers are still rare, despite the fact that prior research has shown a negative correlation between forgiveness and suicide risk. Thus, using a sample of teenagers, the authors evaluated the moderating effect of gender. The findings showed that, for boys but not for girls, forgiveness mitigated the association between depression and suicide thoughts. In particular, among males, when forgiveness levels rose, the correlation between depression and suicide thoughts and actions diminished (Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018).

As mediating consequences of interpersonal stress at work, relationships between forgiveness and workplace health promotion were investigated. Forgiveness and career results are strongly correlated. By (at least partially) lowering stress associated with workplace crimes, forgiveness may be linked to results. After experiencing emotional harm at work, forgiveness may be a useful coping strategy that enhances productivity, well-being, and general health (Toussaint et al., 2018). The researchers investigated whether trait forgiveness and depression are mediated by emotion-regulation techniques, and if the mediating effects of various emotion-regulation techniques differed by gender. Results shed light on the underlying emotion-regulation mechanism between trait forgiveness and teenage depression. First, the current study included teenagers in the investigation of the connection between sadness and forgiveness. Furthermore, the substantial direct influence implies that the development of teenagers' forgiveness should get comparable attention from researchers. Second, the relationship between trait forgiveness and sadness was partially mediated by expression suppression and cognitive reappraisal (Toussaint et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). According to Zhang et al. (2020), these findings offer early evidence that forgiveness is related. Research suggests that having positive sentiments about oneself and other people is a crucial aspect of wellbeing. Another study examined the mediating effects of self-reassurance, self-hatred, and self-inadequacy on the associations between depression and interpersonal forgiveness, avoidance, and retaliation, respectively. Overall, our results show how important it is to encourage a positive self-perception in order to boost the positive impacts of interpersonal forgiveness and decrease the detrimental consequences of avoidance and retaliation on depression. A friendly and comforting approach toward oneself and others lowers depressed symptomatology, but self-criticism merely makes the suffering worse (Barcaccia et al., 2020).

II. METHOD

Participants

The study utilizes a quantitative design to examine the relationship between forgiveness and depression. Previous 20 years' studies were examined by using Google Scholar, Science Direct, JSTOR, Research Gate, etc. to measure the trend in the relationship between forgiveness and depression.

Measures

Table 1: Basic Characteristics of Studies conducted on Forgiveness and Depression

Authors & Year	Participants	Outcome Variables	Other Variables	Measures
McCullough et al. (2000)	175 adults	Depression Levels	Age, Gender	Beck Depression Inventory
Toussaint et	150 college	Depression	Self-Esteem,	State-Trait Anxiety Inventory

al. (2001)	students	Anxiety	attachment	
Worthington et al.(2003)	64 adults in therapy	Depression anxiety	Coping strategies	Inventory of Forgiveness
Enright et al.(2007)	80 adults	Depression	Resilience	Rosenberg Self-esteem scale
Sutherland et al. (2008)	100 adults	Depression	Faith, spirituality	Brief Spirituality Inventory
Lin et al. (2011)	30 students (varied participants)	Depression, Mental Health	Age	Various scales across studies
Karremans et al. (2009)	70 adults	Affective states	Relationship quality	Positive and Negative Affective Schedule
Chen et al. (2019)	9860 individuals	Well-being	Socioeconomic status	Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality Scale
Riek et al. (2018)	150 adults	Depression	Empathy, Forgiveness	Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale
Worthington et al. (2020)	25 studies (varied participants)	Depression	Various demographic factors	Various assessment utilized across studies

Procedure

Studies were recruited through online search engines of different platforms. Data Analysis in the form of systematic review was computed for studies on forgiveness and depression levels. Analyses may also be used to determine the predictive power of forgiveness on depression scores.

III. RESULTS

Table 2: Major studies conducted to Investigate the effect of Forgiveness on Depression

Authors & Year	Type of Study	Findings
McCullough et al. (2000)	Longitudinal	Higher levels of Forgiveness were associated with lower levels of depression over time.
Toussaint et al. (2001)	Survey	Forgiveness was negatively correlated with depression and anxiety symptoms in college students.
Worthington et al. (2003)	Intervention	Participants who received forgiveness intervention showed significant reduction in depression compared to control group.
Enright et al. (2007)	Experimental	Forgiveness therapy resulted in depression and self-esteem after 12 weeks.
Sutherland et al. (2008)	Cross-sectional	High levels of personal forgiveness were linked to lower levels of depression, especially in religious context.
Lin et al. (2011)	Meta-analysis	Strong correlation found between forgiveness and lower rates of depression across multiple studies analysed.
Karremans et al. (2009)	Experimental	Forgiveness Intervention led to lower negative affect and higher positive affect, indirectly reducing symptoms of depression.
Chen et al. (2019)	Cross-sectional	All forgiveness measures were positively associated with all psychosocial well-being outcomes, and inversely associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms.
Riek et al. (2018)	Cross-sectional	Results indicated that empathy and forgiveness were significant predictor of depression, highlighting the interplay between these constructs.
Worthington et al. (2020)	Meta-analysis	Meta-Analysis concluded that forgiveness not only predicts lower depression but also acts as a buffer against its onset related to

		interpersonal conflicts.
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Result shows the reduction in depression symptoms. Studies indicate that individuals who engage in forgiveness often experience a significant decrease in depressive symptoms, including sadness and hopelessness. Improved Emotional Well-Being like Practicing forgiveness can lead to increased emotional stability and well-being, fostering positive feelings that counteract the negative emotions associated with depression. Strengthened Interpersonal Relationships such as Forgiveness can enhance relationships by reducing conflict and promoting understanding, leading to greater social support which is crucial for mitigating depression. Decreased anxiety levels like forgiveness is associated with lower anxiety levels, and since anxiety often co-occurs with depression, this reduction can further alleviate depressive symptoms. Individuals who forgive tend to develop greater resilience, allowing them to better cope with stressors and challenges that might otherwise lead to depressive episodes. Engaging in forgiveness can boost self-esteem by fostering a sense of empowerment and personal agency, which is beneficial for those struggling with feelings of worthlessness often linked with depression. Forgiveness has been linked to lower levels of stress hormones and improved physical health outcomes, contributing to better overall mental health. Many therapeutic approaches incorporate forgiveness as a key component, showing that it can be an effective pathway toward recovery from depression. For many individuals, forgiveness facilitates a sense of spiritual or existential understanding, providing meaning and hope that can be pivotal in overcoming depression. Overall, the act of forgiveness has significant positive effects on depression, contributing to emotional, psychological, and relational improvements. It serves not only as a mechanism for healing but also as a vital component of overall mental health and well-being.

IV.DISCUSSION

To increase forgiveness and manage depressive thoughts, it’s essential to adopt a multifaceted approach. Start by practicing self-compassion, treating yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer a close friend. Acknowledge and validate your emotions without harsh self-judgment. Pay attention to negative thought patterns that may be keeping you tethered to past grievances or hurt; challenge these thoughts by reframing them in more positive or neutral terms. Letting go of resentment is crucial, as holding onto anger or grudges can hinder your personal growth and well-being. Engaging in gratitude practices can shift your focus from past hurts to the positive aspects of your life, fostering a more optimistic outlook. Additionally, seeking support by talking to trusted friends, family members, or a therapist can help you process your feelings and relieve emotional burdens. Incorporating mindfulness techniques, such as meditation or deep breathing exercises, can help ground you in the present and alleviate ruminative thoughts. Regularly engaging in activities that bring you joy and fulfilment can distract from depressive feelings, while ensuring you prioritize adequate sleep (7-9 hours) can greatly enhance your mood and cognitive function. Exercise is another powerful tool, as physical activity is proven to reduce symptoms of depression and elevate mood. Finally, if depressive thoughts persist, consider reaching out to a mental health professional who can provide tailored support and strategies to navigate these complex feelings. Prioritizing your mental health through forgiveness and coping mechanisms can lead to a more positive and fulfilling life (Ciydem & Avci, 2025; Fincham, 2025).

A variety of long-term issues with psychological functioning are linked to interpersonal injuries and aggression against the individual, which are quite common. Research on the benefits of forgiveness therapy for enhancing many facets of psychological well-being in groups of people who have endured various forms of trauma, violence, or hurt is expanding. The results of a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of process-based forgiveness therapies among samples of adults and adolescents who have been the victims of various forms of violence or harm are presented in this article. The findings offer compelling evidence that forgiveness of a range of interpersonal transgressions in real life can be beneficial for fostering several aspects of mental health. However, more investigation is required (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018). Another study looked at the connections between depression and forgiving of oneself, other people, and circumstances as well as overall self-efficacy. According to the study's findings, feelings of stress, anxiety, and sadness were inversely correlated with forgiving of oneself and circumstances. However, overall self-efficacy and the ability to forgive others did not significantly predict stress, anxiety, or depression. In order to help university students, deal with negative affectivity symptoms including

stress, anxiety, and depression, mental health professionals should concentrate on helping their clients become more forgiving (Gençoğlu et al., 2018; Thakur, 2024).

V. CONCLUSION

The link between forgiveness and depression examines the importance of forgiveness in reducing depressed symptoms. A thorough literature analysis covering a decade of studies reveals favorable associations between forgiveness and depression, establishing important hypotheses that show that unforgiveness is associated with poor mental health, whereas forgiveness serves as a useful coping method. The findings show that practicing forgiveness dramatically reduces depressive symptoms, improves emotional well-being, strengthens interpersonal connections, and reduces anxiety levels, all of which contribute to a higher quality of life. This study emphasizes the transforming power of forgiveness, highlighting its potential as a critical therapeutic tool for improving resilience and mental health, eventually leading to a more pleasant and happy life experience.

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