Embodying Forgiveness

Embracing Justice and Compassion

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With gratitude to the many colleagues and students who have collaborated on the projects presented today.
C.S. Lewis

“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”
“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”
- C.S. Lewis
Themes that promote repentance and interpersonal forgiveness

Seeing...

- relationships to God and others as deeply interconnected
- people as image bearers of God
- our need for forgiveness: humility & gratitude

What gives you the will to forgive?

Seeing through the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. ~Miroslav Volf
Reflections on granting forgiveness

• Begins with relational injustice.  
  Aims toward right relationships.

• Prioritizes safety. Engages justice and mercy.

• Sees more the of the truth, not less.
  – Remembers the humanity of the wrongdoer, refuses to totalize.
  – Sees the wrongdoing as evidence of the need to change, desires that good change

• Varies, depending on the relationship, transgression, context, and the persons forgiving & being forgiven.
What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a moral response to relational injustice.

Forgiveness overcomes hostility, avoidance, and responses that diminish the offender.

By granting goodwill, compassion, and love that seeks the offender’s positive transformation.

WHILE holding the offender responsible (justice).

AND forgiveness can be genuine even if reconciliation is not possible, safe, or wise.
PsycINFO database publications on forgiveness using search term forgiv*

by September 2016

4336 results for forgiv*
(2526 peer-reviewed)
(1431 empirical, peer-rev) 33%

142 for seeking & forgiv*
(79 peer-reviewed)
(55 empirical peer-rev) <4%

203 for self-forgiv*
(123 peer-reviewed)
(82 empirical peer-rev) <6%

Smedes’ The Art of Forgiving

Templeton Forgiveness RFP
Percent of words in all electronically searchable books: “forgive”

Templeton RFP

The Art of Forgiving
Forgiveness prerequisites

• **Safety first**
  – Physical, emotional, spiritual

• **Justice matters**
  – For the good of the victim, the transgressor, the community.
What forgiving is NOT

• *It’s not forgetting*
  
  – We are made to remember hurts.
  – Remembering protects us.
...and forgiving is **NOT**

- denying
- excusing
- tolerating
- minimizing

- legally pardoning *(justice matters)*
- reconciling *(not always safe, possible, or wise)*
- limited to times we receive apologies and witness repentance
What does forgiveness involve?

- **Turn away from**
  - resentment, grudges, bitterness, ruminating about offender and offense.

- **Face and Embrace**
  - the offender’s *humanity*
  - offense as evidence of a *need for grace.*
  - desire for the offender’s ultimate good.

  - Find a way to genuinely wish him/her well.
  - Pray for redemption in this situation and ultimately.
Kinds of forgiveness

• *Decisional forgiveness*  
  – Commitment to behave in forgiving ways.

• *Emotional forgiveness*  
  – Heartfelt change
Forgiveness, Feelings, & Physiology


Funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation
Forgiveness, Unforgiveness, and their Side Effects
What happens to our feelings and physiology when we...

- Rehearse memories of hurtful offenses
- Nurse grudges
- Empathize with the offender’s humanity
  - *not* excusing or minimizing
  - perspective-taking
- Grant forgiveness
  - release negative feelings toward the offender
  - adopt merciful thoughts, feelings, & behaviors toward the offender; genuinely wish him/her well
Brief Overview

- 35 females & 36 males
- Participants identified one person who had hurt them emotionally
- They imagined unforgiving (hurt, grudge) & forgiving responses (empathy, forgiveness) to that offender
- During imagery, physiology was monitored
- After imagery, they rated their emotion
Perceived Control During Imagery

Average Scores

- Hurt
- Grudge
- Empathy
- Forgive
Sadness During Imagery

Average Scores

- Hurt
- Grudge
- Empathy
- Forgive
Corrugator (Brow) EMG

4-Second epochs

Microvolts Change Scores

Imagery
Recovery

-0.5

0

0.5

1

1.5

2

2.5

Hurt
Grudge
Empathy
Forgive
Conclusion

• Unforgiving and forgiving imagery had immediate emotional and physical effects.

• *Unforgiving Responses* aroused:
  – greater negative emotion
  – greater physiological stress responses

• *Forgiving Responses* brought:
  – greater positive emotion
  – greater perceived control
  – less physiological stress
Unforgiving responses can backfire.

The cumulative effects of intense & sustained unforgiveness could lead to

– emotional consequences (e.g., depression, anger)
– physical problems (e.g., cardiovascular, stress-induced immune system compromise).

 Forgiveness can paradoxically free us from emotional & physical stress.
Rumination
Grudges

Empathy
Forgiveness
Comparing Compassion vs. Suppression

Emotion and Physiology


*Funded by a grant from the Fetzer Institute*
Does Suppression Work as Well as Compassion?
(tested with a repeated measures experimental design)

- self-restraint to suppress negativity
  - Not feeling negative, unforgiving emotions
  - Not showing negative, unforgiving emotions

- compassionate reappraisal
  - Focus on offender as a human being
  - offense shows that person’s need to experience a positive transformation or healing
  - give a gift of mercy and genuinely wish that person well

- ruminate about the offender
  - focus on the offender’s hurtful behavior
Major Findings

Suppression of Unforgiveness

• Reduced negative emotion
  – ratings
  – writing
  – brow muscle tension, heart rate

• Did not increase forgiveness
Compassionate Reappraisal

**Psychological**
- Lower levels of:
  - Negative emotion
  - Arousal
- Higher levels of:
  - Perceived control
  - Positive emotions
  - Social orientation
  - Empathy
  - Forgiveness
  - Gratitude

**Physiological**
- Calming and positive:
  - Corrugator (brow) EMG
  - Orbicularis Oculi (eye) EMG
  - ↑ Zygomatic (smile) EMG
  - Heart rate reactivity
  - Blood pressure
  - Skin conductance reactivity (Sympathetic Nervous System)
  - HRV at relaxation levels (Parasympathetic N.S.)
#2 Compassion vs. Suppression responses to rumination


  *Funded by a grant from the Fetzer Institute*

  (tested with a repeated measures experimental design)
Compassion introduces positives into a negative experience
Learning to respond with compassion activates empathy, even during offense memories.
Empathy is the mediator: It changes the way people remember the offender later on.
Compared to rumination

Both Compassion and Suppression:

decreased
• Negative ratings
• Negative writing
• Brow tension (corrugator EMG)
• Heart rate

Compassion unique effects:

increased
• empathy ratings
• forgiveness ratings
• positive writing
• subtle cognitive demand (Stroop, slightly lower accuracy and compassion slowing)
• cardiac pre-ejection periods (PEP); =calmer sympathetic nervous system
• Activated empathy during rumination by the end of the study. Compassion transformed painful memories with empathy.
Rumination  Compassion  Suppression
Positive Reappraisal: See the Situation in a New Light

Goal: tell more of the truth about the situation, rather than less.

Rumination zooms in with detailed focus on the wrongdoer, the wrongdoing, and the negative implications.

Positive Reappraisal uses a wide angle perspective to situate the transgression in perspective (acknowledging the offender’s humanity; seeing good that grew out of the bad).

Examples:
• Compassion-focused reappraisal
• Benefit-focused reappraisal (Witvliet et al., 2010).
Compassion vs. Benefit-Finding


*Funded by a grant from the Fetzer Institute*

(tested with a repeated measures experimental design)
Offense Rumination

- mental reliving of the hurtful offense
- painful emotions associated with the offender, the offense, and its consequences.
Offense Rumination

• Psychological
  Higher levels of
  – Negative emotion
  – Aroused emotion

  Lower levels of
  – Perceived control
  – Positive emotion

• Physiological
  Higher
  – Facial Muscle EMG
    • Corrugator (brow)
    • Orbicularis Oculi (eye)
  – Heart Rate
  – Blood Pressure
  – Skin conductance reactivity
    (Sympathetic Nervous System)

  Lower
  – HRV, impaired calming response
    (Parasympathetic NS)

Witvliet, Ludwig, Vander Laan (2001); Witvliet & McCullough (2007);
Witvliet, Worthington, Root, Sato, Ludwig, and Exline (2008);
Witvliet, Hinman, Knoll, & P. DeYoung (2010); Witvliet, N. DeYoung, Hofelich, & P. DeYoung, (2011)
Alternatives to Rumination

Reappraisal
New perspective on the offense

• Compassion Focus
  • other-oriented, focused on giving

• Benefits Focus
  • self-oriented, focused on receiving
Compassion-Focused Reappraisal

Focus on the humanity of the offender, see transgression as evidence of the offender’s clear need for positive transformation, and genuinely wish him or her well.

Does not overlook or minimize the offense.
Benefit-Focused Reappraisal

Finding benefits even in coping with adversity

growth, lessons learned, strengths shown

while honest about the difficult experience
Experiment

- Participants 38 Females, 33 Males
- Within-subjects repeated measures design
- Every participant completed every condition
- Participants randomly assigned to one of two condition orders
Reduced Arousal and Negative Emotion for Both Compassion-Focused and Benefit-Focused Reappraisals Compared to Offense Rumination
Positive Emotion Increases for Both Compassion-Focused and Benefit-Focused Reappraisal Compared to Offense Rumination
Social Words: Compassion-Focused Reappraisal Increased and Benefit-Focus Decreased Them

![Graph showing the comparison of average word count for different categories of social words. The categories include Offense (C), Compassion, Offense (B), and Benefit-Finding. The graph indicates that Compassion has the highest average word count, followed by Offense (C), Offense (B), and Benefit-Finding.]
Both Positive Reappraisals Calmed Corrugator (Brow) EMG

- Offense (C)
- Compassion
- Offense (B)
- Benefit-Focus

uV Change from Pretrial Baseline

- ***
- *

Significance Levels:
- ***: p < 0.001
- *: p < 0.05
Compassion-Focused Reappraisal Calmed Orbicularis Oculi (Under Eye) EMG

The graph shows the change in uV from pretrial baseline for different conditions:
- Offense (C)
- Compassion
- Offense (B)
- Benefit-Focus

The y-axis represents the change in uV, while the x-axis categorizes the conditions. The asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.
Only Benefit-Focused Reappraisal Increased Zygomatic EMG (Smiling)
Only Compassion-Focused Reappraisal Calmed the Cardiac Cycle
(R-R Intervals, inverted below)

![Heart Rate Variability Graph](image)

- Offense (C)    Compassion    Offense (B)  Benefit-Focus

**ms Change from Pretrial Baseline (Inverted)**

- Offense (C)
- Compassion
- Offense (B)  Benefit-Focus

![Heart Rate Variability Graph](image)
Only Benefit-Focused Reappraisal
Improved Parasympathetic Nervous System Activity

ms² Change from Pretrial Baseline

Offense (C)  Compassion  Offense (B)  Benefit-Focus

***
Compared to rumination

Both Compassion-Focused and Benefit-Focused Reappraisals:

- decreased negative emotions
  - Ratings
  - Writing
  - Facial brow muscle

- increased positive, moral emotions
  - Ratings
  - Writing
Compared to rumination

Both Compassion-Focused and Benefit-Focused Reappraisals:

- decreased negative emotions
  - Ratings
  - Writing
  - Facial brow muscle
- increased positive, moral emotions
  - Ratings
  - Writing

Compassion unique effects:

- highest empathy & forgiveness ratings
- the most forgiving and social language
- calmed eye muscle (orbicularis oculi) EMG
- calmed cardiac R-R intervals
Compassion unique effects:
- stimulated the highest empathy ratings
- prompted the most forgiving and social language
- calmed eye muscle (orbicularis oculi) EMG
- calmed cardiac R-R intervals

Benefits-Focus unique effects:
- highest gratitude and joy ratings
- highest gratitude language
- increased zygomatic smile EMG
- activated the calming parasympathetic nervous system

Rumination

Compassion

Benefit-Finding
Another metaphor
Forgiveness
Bridges the chasm of interpersonal injustice.
Moral response with emotional side effects.
Compassion

Reaches across the gap to rehumanize the offender, sees transgression as evidence of how offender needs to change, desires that good for the offender
Benefit-Focused Reappraisal

Builds understanding of my own growth, learning, and strength through facing the injustice.

This builds the bridge from my side of the chasm.
Tell me again, what does forgiveness involve?

1. Tell the truth about the offender. Remember the offender is a human being—a person first.

2. Tell the truth about the offense. Give a fair-minded, clear-eyed account of the wrong done and its implications.

3. Transform your perspective: See the blameworthy offense as evidence of that person’s need to change and grow.

4. Grace—pay it forward:
   • Find even a small way to genuinely wish the offender well in being transformed.
   • Pray for redemption in this situation and ultimately.