Rumination undercuts forgiveness and keeps the offender, the offence, and the burning emotions of revenge and hatred fully alive. How can psychological research and practice help people to calm the flames, and reap the personal benefits that forgiving can bring?
Forgiveness

Loren L. Toussaint and Everett L. Worthington Jr
review the evidence and look at interventions

What makes a good marriage? Contrary to popular belief, it is not communication. That's important, but good communication turns out to be the product of a good marriage rather than the cause. The cause of a good marriage is couples who can form a close emotional bond, maintain and strengthen it, and repair when damaged. Forgiveness is one of the chief ways that couples can repair damaged emotional bonds (Fincham, 2000).

Similarly, why do people most commonly leave their jobs (Toussaint et al., in press)? It is not because of poor pay, piddling perks, or a partner packing up for elsewhere. People mostly leave their jobs because they have intractable conflict with either a boss or co-worker.

Why do people in countries with histories of conflict continue to have festering hostilities to outgroups (see the 2014 review led by Daryl Van Tongeren)? It is not the absence of a truce. Likewise, what came to the fore in Don Davis and colleagues' 2013 meta-analysis on religion/spirituality and aggression or violence? Not theology: unforgiveness is the culprit.

Along with David Williams, we edited a 2015 book which showed that unforgiveness is the harbinger of worse mental and physical health, and economic, social and spiritual problems. Unforgiveness is a combined embodied experience of resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger and fear. Usually, unforgiveness builds over time after ruminating about an unresolved or particularly heinous offence.

Life is filled with injustices, and most fade away on their own (McCullough et al., 2010). But some of the bigger injustices require more attention. There are many ways to address injustices (Wade & Worthington, 2003). These include seeking justice, seeing justice done (Exline et al., 2003), or even relinquishing the event to God (or some Higher Power) with the expectation that divine justice will be exacted (Worthington & Sandage, 2015). Of course, some people seek to deal with injustice by taking things into their own hands. While revenge is effective at reducing the sense of injustice, it has social consequences: a cycle of offence and counter-offence, revenge followed by more revenge (Worthington, 2006). It's a temporary fix unless it is so final that it silences all come-backs. There are more prosocial ways of dealing with injustices before they reach the status of unforgiveness and its associated mental health sequelae.

Sometimes forbearing, or simply not responding to an offence for the sake of group harmony (Lin, 2016), is applicable. Other times acceptance and moving on with life is helpful (Harris & Haynes, 2009). Less adaptive coping includes excusing (i.e. letting go of blame because one sees extenuating circumstances as the cause of the transgression) or justifying (i.e. realising that the offender indeed did wrong, but that they were provoked to the extent of having a justifiable reason for doing so; see Wade & Worthington, 2003).

But once a sense of injustice morphs into...
unforgiving emotions, the ways of managing the feelings of unforgiveness effectively are dramatically narrowed. At that point, forgiveness is one of the few ways that people set their lives back on an even keel and perhaps move toward reconciliation.

**What is forgiveness?**

There are several types of forgiveness. *Divine forgiveness* is forgiveness by God or a Higher Power. *Forgiveness of others* is about having been offended or wronged. *Self-forgiveness* is more about the experience of self-condemnation and being able to relieve it. *Intergroup forgiveness* is about giving up resentment toward an offending outgroup situated in a specific socio-political or cultural context. It happens on a social, not individual scale, and is largely facilitated by admission of guilt from and developing trust in an offending group. Conversely, negative emotions toward the offending group and strong ingroup identity of the victim group inhibit intergroup forgiveness (Van Tongeren et al., 2014). We will focus on forgiving others.

While debates still exist in theology, philosophy and the humanities about what forgiveness is, the social sciences have generally settled on an understanding. Forgiveness of others comes in two varieties, which are separate and not necessarily connected to each other, though they tend to be correlated about .4 (Davis et al., 2015). *Decisional forgiveness* is a behavioural intention to not seek revenge and to treat the offender as a valued and valuable person (McCullough, 2008). A victim might experience complete and lifelong decisional forgiveness and still feel enormous emotional *unforgiveness*, especially if the unjust event is traumatic with emotional triggers near the surface, has been repeated, was long-lasting or is ongoing. Thus emotional forgiveness is the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions such as empathy, sympathy, compassion or love. This tends to be facilitated by non-self-focused emotions, like gratitude, humility and hope, but those emotions are not the replacement emotions.

The positive emotions do not show up at once in the journey of emotional forgiveness. At first, negative emotional tone is reduced as some of the resentment and bitterness are neutralised. If the offender is a stranger or someone with whom one does not intend to continue to interact, then complete emotional forgiveness is usually thought to have been experienced when one reaches emotional neutrality. But with an ongoing and valued relationship, usually one seeks to continue to add empathy, sympathy, compassion or love after emotional neutrality has been experienced.

Decisional and emotional forgiveness are internal experiences, not social experiences. Thus, saying ‘I forgive you’ is not forgiveness but is part of the social interaction that could lead to reconciliation (an interpersonal experience of restoring sufficient trust). And forgiveness is not the same as justice, which is an external, social, societal phenomenon. They reside in two different strata. One can completely forgive a person who murdered a loved one, and yet if the murderer is apprehended, they will still face the justice system. Similarly, if a person is abused by their partner, they may forgive the perpetrator without seeking reconciliation.

**Getting from injustice and unforgiveness to forgiveness**

If the perpetrator denies responsibility, refuses to seem contrite or apologise, or even reoffends and piles on other offences or abuses (Schonbach, 1990), what we call the ‘injustice gap’ widens (Davis et al., 2016). Victims might deal with injustice in numerous ways. Wade and Worthington (2003) found that, even for people who experienced no forgiveness, the range of reported scores on unforgiveness was from none to maximum. The range decreased as forgiveness increased. People used many ways to reduce their unforgiveness – not just forgiveness.

Some people are more forgiving than others. What explains these differences? Psychological scientists have been looking closely at this question for a couple of decades now and are amassing considerable empirical evidence. Recent meta-analyses (Fehr et al., 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012) including studies examining over 25,000 participants have shed important light on the most important correlates of forgiveness. A convenient rubric for categorising the different forgiveness correlates is to divide them into personality, relational, event-specific, and social cognitive groups.

Several personality characteristics are important for forgiveness. First, agreeableness is the tendency to be kind, sympathetic, pleasing, and warm in interactions with others. This personality trait serves the needs of forgiveness well and supports the process. Second, all major worldwide religions prize forgiveness and educate adherents on its value. Not surprisingly, individuals who are more religious tend to be more forgiving. Third, those folks who tend to be nervous, anxious, and distressed (i.e. high neuroticism) are also more likely to be less forgiving.

Aspects of the victim–offender relationship and

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Raw Text
the offence itself are also good indicators of whether or not a victim will forgive. For instance, we tend to forgive those we are close to more readily than strangers. We also tend to forgive small, often unintentional, infractions more quickly than larger ones. Compare being cut off in traffic by a harried mother toting several kids to music lessons to being intentionally run off the road by a mean-spirited driver of a sport-utility vehicle. Furthermore, consider your reaction when the beleaguered mom gives you the sheepish ‘Oops, my bad’ wave.

Finally, a couple of social-cognitive factors are important to consider. These include empathy and rumination. Ruminaton is thinking too much and too negatively about something, and what people ruminate about following an interpersonal transgression really matters (Berry et al., 2005). Some people ruminate angrily. They replay the injustice and might fantasise about paying the offender back. Angry rumination fuels hostility, vengeance, seething bitterness and grudges. It can lead to anger disorders. Some people, though, ruminate anxiously. These people tend to interpret offences as ‘hurt’, and they are afraid or uptight about being hurt again. So, they rehearse possible additional offences and the pain involved with them. Not surprisingly, they can develop anxiety problems. For other people, the rumination is sad. People might feel powerless to prevent future hurts or deal with past ones. Sad rumination leads to depression. Ruminaton undercuts forgiveness and keeps the offender, the offence, and the burning emotions of revenge and hatred fully alive. And then there’s empathy. Often victims don’t want to empathise with offenders; they want to demonise them. But the sometimes painful process of empathy pays dividends in moving forgiveness along. This might be because empathy brings greater clarity to offender motivations (often not malevolent), common humanity, and the imperfection of our world.

What do I stand to gain?
So let me get this straight, you might say. I get hurt and you want me to forgive the offender?! I’m the one who got hurt. The offender should do something for me! This kind of thinking traps victims in their pain and offers no plausible solution, especially if offenders don’t realise that they did something wrong, or even if they do, and they just don’t feel like making amends. The situation seems intractable and locks victims into a space filled with hurt. Carrying this hurt can be a burden to one’s social, physical and mental wellbeing. Forgiveness eases this and not surprisingly is linked to improved health and quality of life.

Of all the benefits of forgiveness, health benefits seem to pique interest. Imagine that you’ve been nursing a grudge for months, maybe even years, and you finally decide you’re going to forgive. What a feeling! Often people describe feeling lighter, like they have more bounce in their step, or that they again feel truly alive. Some research even suggests that those that have forgiven view physical challenges, like running up a hill, as being more manageable (Zheng et al., 2015). Forgiveness actually feels good and is connected to better health. Many people can attest to this personally. But why?

Theorists set out to describe a conceptual model that would tie forgiveness to health in a meaningful way. The most commonly accepted approach to understanding the forgiveness–health connection invokes a decades-old notion of how we cope with stress. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman have described the connections between our perceptions of stress, coping resources and health consequences. In a nutshell, the theory suggests that when we perceive something in our environment that poses a threat, potential harm or a significant challenge, we feel stress. The stress that we experience impacts all levels of functioning through stimulating behavioural, emotional and biological responses that, when chronic, ultimately erode our health.

But this model doesn’t see stress as a reflex-like mechanism. The same stressful event does not produce the exact same response across time or people. Rather, we often choose how we manage a potentially stressful event. We cope, in many different ways. Problem-focused coping emphasises dealing directly with the
Problem at hand, trying to reduce its impact, or finding alternatives and solutions. Emotion-focused coping focuses on managing one’s emotions in the midst of a stressful event. This might involve distancing yourself from a stressful situation, denying its occurrence or impact or fantasising about a better place or time.

The brilliance of the cognitive appraisal model is that individual differences in coping account for many differences in health outcomes, even though people might have experienced the same stressful event. Been dealt a rough hand in life? A challenging childhood, unstable housing, financial problems, several interpersonal losses… maybe that has left you feeling let down by important individuals. This is where forgiveness, as a coping mechanism, comes into play. Decide to move forward in life unencumbered by the weight of negative emotions, and it would come as no surprise to find that the stressfulness of past wrongdoings is limited and so are the unhealthy effects of this stress. This is the stress-and-coping model of forgiveness that postulates that forgiveness is an emotion-focused coping mechanism that reduces the stressful effects of the injustice gap and promotes health and wellbeing (Strelan & Covic, 2006; Worthington, 2006).

Recent research supports this theory. For instance, in one study cumulative lifetime stress was found, as expected, to be correlated with increased mental health problems. However, forgiveness moderated this association. The expected correlation between stress and mental health was present for participants with moderate and low forgiveness, but it was all but entirely erased for participants with the highest levels of forgiveness. Similarly, growth modelling over a five-week time span showed that people who experience increases in forgiveness over time also experience decreases in mental health problems, and a significant part of this association is explained by decreases in stress (Toussaint et al., 2016a; Toussaint et al., 2016b). As with all forms of coping, no single coping strategy is a panacea for every type of stress, but forgiveness is a good-fitting approach for coping with interpersonally stressful events where there is a clear culpable wrongdoer.

Beyond its stress-reduction properties, forgiveness also enhances other health- and wellbeing-related processes. Emotional forgiveness has the most health effect because it reduces stress-related problems (see Griffin et al., 2015). That is probably because emotional forgiveness takes away much of the power behind angry, anxious and sad rumination. Decisions to forgive probably have the largest effect on relational wellbeing (for a review and meta-analysis, see Riek & Mania, 2012). That is probably because intentions to behave more positively can result in changed relational behaviors. Emotional changes due to emotional forgiveness tend to be more internal. Decisional forgiveness is likely to be more related to spiritual health than is emotional forgiveness (for a review and meta-analysis, see Davis et al., 2013; Worthington & Sandage, 2015). In addition, forgiveness – probably emotional forgiveness for the most part – has public health benefits in contributing to better physical and mental health (for a review and conceptual justification, see Worthington et al., 2016). It can also benefit society by contributing to peace and political reconciliation.

Programmes to promote forgiveness
Without any treatment, most people reduce the amount of unforgiveness they feel over time, which McCullough and colleagues have described a logarithmic decrease. Over three weeks it reaches a low level, with more of the decrease coming in the first three days. But people are highly variable in their response. So can psychologists help to promote forgiveness more quickly and more thoroughly than the natural decay of unforgiveness?

A 2014 meta-analysis of 54 randomised controlled trials, Wade et al. compared forgiveness interventions with either a non-action control or an alternative treatment (like relaxation). The results are clear. First, Worthington’s (2006) REACH forgiveness model and Enright’s process model (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2014) were used about equally, and each was used as much as all other programmes added together. Second, time, not programme, was the major factor in efficacy; time spent trying to forgive correlated about .75 with amount of forgiveness experienced. Third, the effect size was about .1 standard deviation of forgiveness per hour of treatment compared with natural logarithmic decay of amount of unforgiveness. So, a six-hour group might produce d = .6 – regardless of whose treatment was employed. Fourth, forgiveness treatments tended to also improve mental health, even though mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and hope were not directly confronted during treatment.

But how do forgiveness interventions work? There are motivational factors. Worthington (2006) showed that hearing a self-improvement rationale – forgive because it is good for one’s physical and mental health,
relationships and, perhaps, spirituality – produces a lasting change of about .2 standard deviations of improvement relative to no treatment. But beyond that motivational effect, two other candidates vie for priority of explanatory theory. One candidate is stress-and-coping theory. Presumably, people practise and learn coping strategies better in six hours of treatment than in two hours. But, the strong dose–response connection between time spent focusing on forgiveness and the amount of forgiveness experienced, also suggests a second theory. Benefit might be due to mere exposure. The psychological mechanisms of what might occur with mere exposure can range from cognitive processing explanations to de-conditioning explanations to allowing the unconscious conflicts to be worked out. In addition, some treatments might employ psychotherapists, couple therapists or group leaders, who might serve as models or conduits for passing along specific information. But do-it-yourself workbooks have been equally effective as psychoeducational groups or individual psychotherapy (Greer et al., 2014; Harper et al., 2014), which argues against a psychotherapist effect.

Forgiveness interventions have been adapted to a variety of problems – like forgiveness for incest, alcoholism and medical problems. They also have been adapted for use with families, couples, groups, individual psychotherapy and do-it-yourself workbooks. Finally, they have been adapted for use in religious or spiritual populations and use in other cultures. Of course, questions remain. The strong dose-response effect raises the question of whether any powerful one- or two-hour intervention can outperform the dose–response curve substantially. Questions about effectiveness in real-world settings and dissemination to widespread networks also need to be answered. And finally, this research on forgiveness is mostly secular. Although some religious groups advocate forgiveness, to forgive is human, not the purview of religion. Forgiveness is something that we all seem to need and we all seem, at times, to need to consider giving. Psychological science is uncovering ways to help, but we still have a distance to move.

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