

Loren L. Toussaint
Everett L. Worthington, Jr.
David R. Williams
Editors

Forgiveness and Health

Scientific Evidence and Theories
Relating Forgiveness to Better Health

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Endorsements

The world being what it is, there is no shortage of circumstances where the worst of human behaviors provides the opportunity for one of the best, namely, forgiveness. Philosophers have long wrestled with the question of whether forgiveness is better for the forgiver or the forgivee. Remarkably, this question has become a subject of careful scientific research in recent years, and this excellent, important book presents the first thorough overview of the subject. Naturally, the answer to the question “Is forgiveness good for you?” is mighty complicated.

Robert M Sapolsky

John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn, Professor

Departments of Biology, Neurosurgery, and Neurology and Neurological Sciences

How we experience life’s challenges can profoundly affect our well-being. In this outstanding book, Toussaint, Worthington, and Williams open our eyes to the power of forgiveness, which may be one of the most important tools we have for reducing disease and improving human health. Their review of the subject is the best to date and a must-read for scientists, practitioners, and laypeople alike.

George M. Slavich

Director, Laboratory for Stress Assessment and Research

Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology

University of California, Los Angeles

This volume contains a treasure-trove of insights into the complex relationships between forgiveness and health. The editors have brought together a superb cast of contributors from multiple disciplines to produce an extremely valuable and important work. This combination of theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and applied chapters promises to shape agendas on forgiveness and health for years to come.

Anyone interested in this burgeoning field of inquiry will want to have this book on their shelves.

Christopher G. Ellison
Professor of Sociology
Dean's Distinguished Professor of Social Science
University of Texas at San Antonio

This volume is cutting-edge. All that is currently known on forgiveness, unforgiveness, and health is covered between these covers. This book is a remarkable compilation of chapters that review research findings on the relationship between forgiveness and medical and mental health and is of great significance in this emerging area.

Leslie Greenberg
Professor
Department of Psychology
York University

Forgiveness and Health is the definitive volume on the role of forgiveness in human health. Scholarly, creative, and user-friendly, the chapters in this book are likely to steer the field for many years to come.

Michael McCullough
Professor
Department of Psychology
University of Miami

This book is a comprehensive and carefully crafted resource for researchers, teachers, students, and anyone looking to better understand the science of how forgiveness can improve one's health. Leading contributors offer deep insight and useful recommendations about forgiveness and well-being. This book is the best answer to date of the important question "How and why is forgiveness good for you?"

Frederic Luskin
Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects

Research on forgiveness has seen an explosion of interest and activity over the past several years. In *Forgiveness and Health*, Toussaint, Worthington, and Williams have done the burgeoning field an important service by bringing together top scholars in the field to assess the current state of theory, measurement, and findings on the topic. As important, their volume provides crucial insights for helping to guide future research efforts on forgiveness and its consequences. There is little doubt that *Forgiveness and Health* will be an essential resource for scholars in the field for years to come.

Marc Musick
Professor, Department of Sociology
Mike Hogg Professor in Liberal Arts
Senior Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts

This volume signals a coming-of-age of forgiveness theory, research, and practice. Written by leaders in the field, the chapters in *Forgiveness and Health* report on the latest advances in the definition, theory, and measurement of forgiveness. In rich detail, they describe how forgiveness is fully interwoven into physical health, mental health, culture, and context. The volume cements the vital role of forgiveness in efforts to understand and enhance health and well-being and is highly recommended for researchers and practitioners alike.

Kenneth I. Pargament, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Psychology
Bowling Green State University

This volume provides a welcome and comprehensive approach to understanding forgiveness and its role in health. It is well known that social ties are key determinants of good health and well-being and that social isolation is a risk. But there are strains in every relationship and a need for restoration. Forgiveness is a mechanism for the repair of social relationships – and it is available to everyone.

Ellen L Idler, Ph.D.
Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Sociology
Director, Religion and Public Health Collaborative
Department of Epidemiology, Rollins School of Public Health
Emory University

Drs. Toussaint, Worthington, and Williams are, of course, three of the leading experts on the topic of forgiveness and how it relates to, and impacts, both mental and physical health. Consequently, it is not surprising that they assembled a true all-star collection of authors in this comprehensive volume on forgiveness. Though the research literature is not as plentiful in this area as in others with longer histories, through examination of this book, I found it rather amazing how much work has been done in a relatively short amount of time. There is currently no better source for a thorough survey of the work on forgiveness and health than this book. All scholars interested in this area will want to have this volume on their shelf.

Kevin S. Masters, Ph.D.
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Editor-in-Chief, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*
Past President, Division 38 (Health Psychology) American Psychological Association
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Context, Overview, and Guiding Questions

Loren L. Toussaint, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., and David R. Williams

In the past couple of decades, we have witnessed rapid growth in scientific investigations of forgiveness from many perspectives within psychology and in other disciplines. Many peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly chapters and books have been published each year. Interest in forgiveness continues to grow both among scientists and the lay public (Worthington, 2005). Despite continuing interest in forgiveness and its benefits, few attempts have been made to systematically organize research describing the extent of positive psychological and health benefits of forgiveness. The question remains, is forgiveness good for you? Under what conditions are the positive effects of forgiveness observed? These important questions remain unanswered even though some of the earliest theoretical attempts to connect forgiveness to health and well-being posited its beneficial effects for major societal health problems such as cardiovascular disease and cancer (e.g., Kaplan, 1992).

Without a central organizing source for thinking about forgiveness and health connections, scholars pursuing this work have nevertheless made inroads into this area of inquiry. A catalyst for the growth of research in this area was the John Templeton Foundation's Campaign for Forgiveness Research that was established in 1998 under the leadership of Everett Worthington. For example, a large nationally representative study funded by this initiative documented that forgiveness was

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positively related to mental and physical health (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Similarly, initiative-funded laboratory investigations documented that forgiveness was related to physiological response parameters (Lawler et al., 2003; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). These studies, and many others, set the stage for continued investigation of the health and well-being benefits of forgiveness. Recent work has also sought to understand mechanisms of action and to extend connections between forgiveness and health to chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, substance use, and chronic pain (Carson et al., 2005; Toussaint & Cheadle, 2009; Toussaint et al., 2014).

In this volume, we collect the state-of-the-art research reviews on forgiveness and mental health, physical health, and well-being. Forgiveness has been examined from moral, ethical, and philosophical perspectives. Other discussions of forgiveness consider ways to become more forgiving. Still others postulate evolutionary theories of revenge and forgiveness. In most of these descriptions of forgiveness, there is some attention paid to the benefits of forgiveness, but it is not central to the work. In the current volume, we focus specifically on connections between forgiveness and its health and well-being benefits.

We organize the book to offer an understanding of the theories, methods, and research used in understanding the connections between forgiveness and health and well-being. Furthermore, we consider trait and state forgiveness, emotional and decisional forgiveness, and interventions to promote forgiveness all with an eye toward the positive effects of forgiveness for a victim's (and in some cases offender's) health and well-being. We will consider health to involve social and relational aspects, mental symptoms or disorders, and self-reported physical health, as well as, physiological indicators of good health, well-being/happiness, chronic health conditions, and adjustment to disease or disorder. In addition to documenting the breadth and diversity of the connections between forgiveness and health and well-being, we also include chapters in this volume that consider key moderators such as gender, race, and age, as well as, explanatory mechanisms that might mediate links between forgiveness and key outcomes.

Important to any scientific investigation is a basic understanding of the topic under consideration. Hence, Chap. 2 begins with reflections on the definition of forgiveness. Tucker, Bitman, Wade, and Cornish examine the history and scope of forgiveness, and they compare definitions of forgiveness from psychological, theological and lay perspectives. They summarize early definitions focusing mainly on interpersonal forgiveness and highlight recent advances in defining forgiveness as multi-dimensional. Their chapter also discusses trait and state definitions, emotional-versus decisional-forgiveness, and philosophical arguments for the uniqueness of the forgiveness construct. They outline what forgiveness involves and what it does not involve. Forgiveness is also contrasted with justice and reconciliation.

In Chap. 3, Lavelock et al. provide an overview of how to conceptualize of the forgiveness, health, and well-being relationships. They offer a macro-level consideration of factors contributing to these relationships. They consider multiple lines of evidence linking forgiveness to health and well-being in a qualitative review of 95 studies. Their review identifies several key areas of interest for investigators

interested in the forgiveness-health connection. These areas are succinctly described in a model that offers heuristic value for future research. Both precursors and mechanisms of forgiveness and its connection to proximal and distal health outcomes are described. For new researchers in the field or the casually interested lay-reader, this is an efficient and cogent model to structure the forgiveness and health connection.

The main focus of Chap. 4 is how to measure forgiveness efficiently and effectively in settings where health and medical issues are of utmost importance and the opportunities for learning about the contribution of forgiveness to health is likely greatest. Witvliet, Van Tongeren, and Root Luna offer a review of existing measures. They supplement that with suggestions for additional measurement considerations that are relevant in clinical healthcare settings. The challenges of assessing forgiveness reliably and validly in the health context are numerous, especially because measurement in health and epidemiological settings often requires great efficiency and ease of understanding. Few existing measures are brief enough or are easily understood by patients who might be physically, cognitively and emotionally burdened. Measures that meet efficiency and understandability criteria have not always been carefully evaluated. Witvliet and her colleagues' chapter provides a balanced review of the strides that have been made in forgiveness assessment in general, and specific to health-related studies. It also includes a careful discussion of what new measures might be viable options.

Larkin, Goulet, and Cavanagh provide a review in Chap. 5 of evidence linking forgiveness to physiological outcomes including parameters indicative of systemic arousal, such as electrodermal activity and heart rate variability; neuro-endocrine outcomes, such as cortisol and oxytocin; immune functioning, such as cytokines and CD4 cell percentage; and other proximal indices of physiological health including blood pressure and electromyographic activity. Their chapter also provides an update and comprehensive review of what is known regarding forgiveness and brain activity. They include measures of electro-encephalographic activity, positron emission tomography, and functional magnetic resonance imaging.

In Chap. 6, Griffin, Worthington, Lavelock, Wade, and Hoyt review the research on connections between forgiveness and mental health. Their review builds on and extends a previous review when there were only about a dozen published studies (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). At present, Griffin et al., review an additional 55 studies published since 2003. This provides an invaluable update to our understanding of the work in this area, and it reflects the substantial growth in interest in forgiveness and mental health. Griffin et al. develop four theoretically meaningful propositions and evaluate the empirical evidence in favor of or against each one. Reading this chapter provides answers to key questions including: (1) Is unforgiveness a stress-reaction related to poor mental health? (2) Is forgiveness a coping strategy related to improved mental health? (3) Do individual differences moderate the relationship between forgiveness and health? and (4) Do psychological states mediate the relationship between forgiveness and health?

For the average reader, Chap. 7 might be one of the more helpful chapters. It surveys how forgiveness is related to physical health in healthy populations. Cheadle and Toussaint consider theories of forgiveness and health that are most applicable

to individuals in the general population. They review empirical research related to those theories. Given that those populations are not health-compromised, much of the research reviewed uses self-reported physical health, somatic symptoms, and health symptoms as the key health outcomes. A good deal of epidemiological research focuses on these indicators of health status and researchers outside the interest area of forgiveness might also make use of this chapter as it offers an opportunity to compare effect sizes of forgiveness with other well-known psychosocial and biological correlates and determinants of health in generally healthy individuals. For instance, some researchers might compare the effect of forgiveness to that of pessimism, social support, religious attendance, and obesity. In brief, several studies have investigated forgiveness in healthy general population samples, and the distillation of key findings from this work could inform researchers, practitioners and the public of the benefits of forgiveness for healthy individuals.

In contrast, in Chap. 8, Friedberg, Tuvia, Alanson, and Cha consider the forgiveness-health connection in patient populations. Patient populations can be difficult to access, for obvious ethical reasons, but a small and growing literature has developed around the potential benefits of forgiveness for patients. While the study of cardiac patients is common, other populations—like patients with cancer, chronic pain, physical and mental injuries, Parkinson's, and HIV—have also been studied. Terminally ill as well as other patients have also been studied. Friedberg et al. offer insightful recommendations for health enhancement, medicine, and integrative treatment suggestions for how forgiveness could be offered to patients as a coping mechanism in dealing with chronic disease.

Chronic pain is a growing problem in the United States and worldwide (Institute of Medicine, 2011). In Chap. 9, Offenbächer, Dezutter, Vallejo, and Toussaint review what has been perhaps one of the most overlooked connections between forgiveness and holistic health—its connection with pain. Offenbächer et al. begin with a brief review of two common forms of chronic pain: (1) chronic widespread pain, and (2) fibromyalgia. After considering the symptom characteristics and basic epidemiology of these conditions, Offenbächer et al. argue that stress is a central biopsychosocial agent involved in pain and outline several highly relevant sources of stress for these individuals. The authors integrate a biopsychosocial stress model of fibromyalgia and forgiveness. They specifically address how forgiveness could be used as a coping mechanism to mitigate the harmful results of stress for people struggling with chronic pain. Given the increasing prevalence of pain, the extent to which forgiveness might offer an effective coping strategy that provides pain relief should receive more attention among researchers and practitioners.

Webb and Jeter provide, in Chap. 10, a comprehensive and integrative review of forgiveness and substance use/abuse intervention models and empirical research on the topic. They discuss Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy, Motivational Enhancement Therapy, and Cognitive-Behavioral Coping Skills Therapy and delineate how forgiveness is inherent in each of these evidence-based psychosocial treatments. A good empirical literature has also begun to develop showing that forgiveness is generally associated with less substance use/abuse. Empirical data exist for college students, general population, and treatment seeking individuals. Webb and Jeter