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# Who forgives others, themselves, and situations? The roles of narcissism, guilt, self-esteem, and agreeableness

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## Abstract

This study extended forgiveness research by examining the relationships between narcissism, guilt, self-esteem, Agreeableness, and forgiveness of others, self, and situations ( $N = 176$ ). Narcissistic entitlement was negatively related, and Agreeableness positively related, to forgiveness of others. Narcissism and the other personality variables were related to self-forgiveness and forgiveness of situations. After controlling for self-esteem and shame, entitlement retained a unique relationship with forgiveness of others, and guilt retained a unique relationship with self-forgiveness. Agreeableness mediated the relationship between entitlement and forgiveness of others, and guilt and self-esteem mediated the relationship between narcissism and self-forgiveness. Although the distinction between forgiveness of self and situations requires clarification, it appears that narcissism and proneness to guilt have the potential to distinguish who forgives others and the self.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on forgiveness has increased dramatically over the past 15 years, with a large number of studies addressing the dispositional characteristics and correlates of forgiveness. The

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overwhelming majority of studies has focused on interpersonal forgiveness, and indicates that personality and individual difference factors, particularly the Big Five, are related to a forgiving disposition. Highly agreeable and extraverted individuals have been found to be more likely to forgive. People who score high on Neuroticism and related affective traits of anger, chronic hostility, anxiety, and depression have been found to be less likely to forgive. The other Big Five factors, Openness and Conscientiousness, appear to be unrelated to interpersonal forgiveness (for a review, see [Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005](#)).

A closely-related construct, self-forgiveness, has, however, attracted relatively little empirical attention. Self-forgiveness is relevant when a person has done something to hurt another, is aware of the nature and extent of his or her actions, and may consequently experience debilitating degrees of guilt, shame, self-loathing, or some similar response. A person may also experience the same negative reactions in relation to self-inflicted hurts where the primary victim is the self, such as engaging in acts that violate one's moral code or lead to failure or regret. Individuals may also inflict psychological harm on themselves through perceived wrongful thoughts, feelings or desires ([Hall & Fincham, 2005](#)).

Irrespective of whether harm has been done to another or the self, self-forgiveness is conceptually quite similar to interpersonal forgiveness in that it involves prosocial motivational change ([McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997](#)). That is, the individual moves from being negatively motivated to positively motivated towards the self ([Hall & Fincham, 2005](#)). More specifically, self-forgiveness entails acknowledging and accepting one's responsibility for a hurtful act or failure, overcoming self-resentment, and respecting and liking oneself again.

Taking responsibility is a key aspect of self-forgiveness, distinguishing it from the related process of the self-serving bias, where individuals take responsibility for positive outcomes but not negative outcomes ([Heider, 1958](#)). Self-forgiveness may be confounded with a self-serving bias to the extent that in effect one absolves oneself of the negative emotions associated with an event. The difference, however, is that in forgiving the self, individuals do not abdicate responsibility for their part in a negative outcome, nor do they transfer blame to circumstances or another.

The few self-forgiveness studies that have been conducted suggest that some of the personality and individual difference correlates of interpersonal forgiveness are also related to self-forgiveness. Individuals who score high on Neuroticism ([Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001](#)), anxiety, depression ([Maltby et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2005](#)), and guilt ([Zechmeister & Romero, 2002](#)) have been found to be less likely to forgive themselves. There is some evidence that extraverted individuals may be more self-forgiving ([Walker & Gorsuch, 2002](#)).

Researchers ([Thompson et al., 2005](#)) have recently argued for a third focus of dispositional forgiveness, situations. Situations represent that aspect of the source of a perceived transgression that might not be easily identified as being another or the self ([Thompson et al., 2005](#)). Individuals may blame an actual situation, for example, the circumstances surrounding a debilitating illness or accident. More likely, however, they may react to the perceived abstract source of the circumstances that led to the situation, by blaming what happened on 'life', or 'an unjust world', or 'fate'. Situations might also be implicated in a transgression committed by the self or other. For example, an individual upset about the consequences and implications of a serious car accident may feel the need to blame a friend for suggesting they take a drive at that time; themselves, for not taking appropriate measures to prevent the accident; and also 'the cruel world' that brought about the circumstances which caused the accident. So long as an individual perceives

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