



## Original article

## Applying the intentional forgetting process to forgiveness



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## ABSTRACT

The current research tests the hypothesis that the cognitive process of intentional forgetting can be applied to promote forgiveness. In three experiments, participants read stories set in second person point of view sentence by sentence. Each story included a target conflict sentence. After each sentence, participants saw a cue indicating forget or remember (Experiment 1,  $n = 89$ ) or important or not important (Experiment 2,  $n = 123$ ) or control cue (Experiment 3,  $n = 198$ ). Findings revealed that, among participants who remembered the transgression, being told to intentionally forget the transgression led to increased forgiveness (Experiments 1 & 3). However, being told that the transgression was not important had no effect on forgiveness (Experiment 2). Overall, results are consistent with the hypothesis that an active process of intentional forgetting (as opposed to a passive process of disregarding unimportant information) can promote forgiveness. The interpersonal and clinical applications of these findings are discussed.

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Many everyday tasks rely on the ability to continually update information by purposefully letting go of old, irrelevant information, a process known as intentional forgetting. Although the memory outcomes for specific information, or products, of intentional forgetting have been applied to various domains, the applications of the process itself have received relatively less consideration (cf. [Golding & MacLeod, 1998](#)). This is despite the fact that researchers have devoted large amounts of time to uncovering the basic cognitive processes involved in intentional forgetting (e.g., [Sahakyan, 2004](#); [Sahakyan & Kelley, 2002](#)). The current research aimed to begin to address this gap in the literature by focusing less on applications of the *products* of intentional forgetting (i.e., answering the question of how successfully forgotten information can be useful) and more on applications of the *process* of intentional forgetting (i.e., answering the question of how actively trying to forget information can be useful). In particular, the current research tested the hypothesis that engaging in the active process of intentional forgetting is a useful way of promoting forgiveness in social relationships.

### 1. Memory outcomes of intentional forgetting

Over the course of several decades, cognitive psychologists have verified the robustness of the intentional forgetting effect on memory. When explicitly told to forget a piece of information

(called directed forgetting in lab settings), people have poorer memory for that information (see [MacLeod, 1998](#) for a review). Researchers have used a number of approaches to produce successful intentional forgetting. For example, in an item-method approach, participants see a list of items, usually words, one at a time. After each word, they see a cue to either remember or forget that word. Other researchers have used a list-method approach, in which participants learn a list of items, or a series of lists, and are later told which lists to remember or forget. Participants are then tested on the material using either recognition or recall tasks. The vast majority of studies demonstrate that the to-be-forgotten information is indeed successfully forgotten, and the to-be-remembered information is better remembered, possibly due to the reduction in proactive interference (e.g., [Bjork, 1970](#); [Golding & MacLeod, 1998](#)). The basic methodology used in both the item and list methods has been reworked to produce successful directed forgetting in a number of settings. It is possible to intentionally forget individual words ([Bjork, Bjork, & Anderson, 1998](#); [Johnson, 1994](#)), emotionally charged information ([Depue, Curran, & Banich, 2007](#); [Nowicka, Marchewka, Jednorog, Tacikowski, & Brechman, 2001](#)), performed actions ([Sahakyan & Foster, 2009](#)), sentences ([Delaney, Nghiem, & Waldum, 2009](#)), and even whole autobiographical events ([Barnier et al., 2007](#); [Joslyn & Oakes, 2005](#)).

Within the past twenty-five years, researchers have also documented the real-world contexts in which the memory products of intentional forgetting may be employed. For example, several studies have shown that, through the successful use of intentional forgetting, when told to do so by a judge, jurors are capable of

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disregarding information when they believe the information is inaccurate or irrelevant to the case (Kassin & Sommers, 1997) or they are suspicious of the source of the information (Fein, McCloskey, & Tomlinson, 1997). Likewise, intentional forgetting may be used successfully by the media when corrections are needed. For example, people are capable of intentionally forgetting retractions (though, the effect appears limited to individuals who were skeptical of the original information; Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Oberauer, & Morales, 2005). Moreover, just as an ability to successfully forget information can be helpful in a variety of contexts, corresponding deficits in such ability can be detrimental, leading to clinical disorders such as OCD, anxiety, and depression (Coles & Heimberg, 2002; Joormann, Hertel, Brozovich, & Gotlib, 2005; Wilhelm, McNally, Baer, & Florin, 1996). In sum, a vast literature suggests that forgetting information on purpose can be performed successfully and can be a useful tool when employed properly.

## 2. The contextual change account: A potential mechanism of intentional forgetting

Although there is still some debate about the specific mechanisms involved in intentional forgetting, one theory that has shown promise in characterizing these mechanisms is the Contextual Change Account (Sahakyan & Kelley, 2002). According to this theory, intentional forgetting involves a certain amount of voluntary control in which the potential forgetter uses conscious strategies to shift attention away from the to-be-forgotten information. In particular, the potential forgetter shifts attention during and after encoding to different contextual cues, including external and internal psychological environments, thereby establishing a new mental context (Sahakyan & Kelley, 2002).

The rationale behind the Contextual Change Account stems from the concept of encoding specificity, the idea that the context in which information is encoded provides a valuable source of memory cues used in later retrieval. Indeed, recall is enhanced when environmental cues present during encoding are also present during retrieval (Godden & Baddeley, 1975). Thus, according to the Contextual Change Account, intentional forgetting tends to produce forgotten information successfully because a shifting of attention changes the contextual cues associated with the original information, thereby inhibiting older cues connected with that information. Consistent with this account, recent findings suggest that brain areas involved in overtly shifting attention, such as prefrontal and parietal regions, play an active role in intentional forgetting processes (e.g. Anderson & Hanslmayr, 2014; Anderson & Weaver, 2009; Fawcett & Taylor, 2010).

## 3. Intentional forgetting and forgiveness

How might the processes underlying intentional forgetting (as specified by the Contextual Change Account) be useful in everyday interactions? One possibility is to promote forgiveness. Forgiveness is a complicated, time and effort intensive process, that is extremely important in maintaining relationships (Davidson, Damiani, Hopkin, & Hoyle, 2011; Wohl & McGrath, 2007). A considerable amount of research has explored the repercussions of forgiveness (McNulty, 2010; Worthington, 2005) as well as the personal and environmental factors that predict people's willingness to forgive (Riek & Mania, 2012). In addition, an emerging body of literature has begun to investigate the cognitive underpinnings of forgiveness (Leach, Greer, & Gaughf, 2010; McCullough, 2001).

A process model of forgiveness, put forth by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), suggests that potential forgivers make a conscious decision to work toward forgiveness. After making this decision, potential forgivers must then work to reframe the offending

situation or rethink their view of the offender in a less negative light (Smith, 1981; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). This process model of forgiveness has many similar components to that of the Contextual Change Account of intentional forgetting. Both require conscious deliberation and, importantly, a reframing of the context. Indeed, to reframe the offending situation's context, one might speculate that the forgiver uses intentional forgetting to reduce the proactive interference of older, outmoded memories in favor of newer, more relevant information (Bjork & Bjork, 1996; Woodward, Bjork, & Jongeward, 1973). Thus, when a person desires to forgive a prior offense, he or she may take advantage of the malleability of a recalled memory trace (Nadar, 2003) and employ cognitive processes of intentional forgetting in order to shift attention to positive information that will help to reframe the offending situation.

Several lines of evidence are consistent with this speculation. Everyday memories are constructive and can be reworked to favor relationship goals (Ross, 1989), and people who focus on good qualities of their partner, while downplaying faults, tend to have greater satisfaction and longevity in their relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1999). For example, people in trusting relationships (as compared to those in untrusting relationships) have biased memory for partner transgressions, recalling fewer transgressions and remembering being more forgiving for those transgressions (Luchies et al., 2013). Additionally, the other side of the coin is true as well. The more someone recalls an item or event to mind, the lower the likelihood the person will forget the item or event (Linton, 1975). Correspondingly, people who continually recall transgressions are less likely to forgive the transgressor (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007). Moreover, in a recent study, researchers observed more forgetting of transgressions for which forgiveness had been granted, demonstrating that forgiveness may promote forgetting, the converse of what is predicted in the current research (Noreen, Bierman, & MacLeod, 2014). Indeed, at some level, people may be somewhat aware of the relationship between forgetting and forgiveness, as indicated by the common phrase "forgive and forget" (Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004).

## 4. The current research

Because intentional forgetting, according to the Contextual Change Account, involves an active process of changing contextual cues and the process of forgiveness requires a similar reframing of context, I hypothesized that attempting to intentionally forget a transgression would promote forgiveness of that transgression. Three experiments were run to test this hypothesis. Experiment 1 tested the hypothesis directly by asking participants to rate their forgiveness of a transgression following an intentional forgetting manipulation. Experiment 2 ruled out an alternative explanation for Experiment 1's findings, namely, that forgiveness could be a result of a lack of elaborative encoding as opposed to an active process of forgetting. Experiment 3 extended the hypothesis by explicitly examining forgiveness among those participants who attempted, but failed, to intentionally forget a transgression.

## 5. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, participants were presented with two short stories each containing a conflict sentence. Following each sentence was a remember cue or a forget cue. Subsequently, participants were asked how likely they would be to forgive the perpetrator of the conflict. If directed forgetting can be used in forgiveness, whether the participants try to forget versus remember the target conflict sentence should influence how likely they are to forgive the perpetrator; specifically, trying to forget the conflict should lead to greater levels of forgiveness.

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