



Self-esteem moderates the response to forgiveness instructions among women with a history of victimization[☆]

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Abstract

The present study examined whether self-esteem would moderate women's affect after being exposed to brief instructional interventions tapping into two dimensions of forgiveness: an interpersonal dimension focusing on forgiving the offender, and an intrapersonal dimension focusing on letting go of one's negative affect toward the offender. The positive and negative affect of 79 women with a history of victimization was assessed after they listened to instructions for either granting forgiveness, letting go of their negative affect, or relaxation (control). Results indicated differential effects of the instructions on emotions directed toward themselves versus toward the offender. Women had more negative emotions about themselves when they received the granting forgiveness instructions, but they had greater positive emotions toward their offenders. Women's responses were moderated by self-esteem in that there was no differential effect of the instructions among women low in self-esteem, but women high in self-esteem had a relatively positive response to the letting-go instructions and a generally negative reaction to the traditional forgiveness instructions.

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1. Introduction

The experience of an interpersonal trauma (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse) leaves many individuals with emotional scars such as feelings of increased anger, depression, guilt, and low self-esteem (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). These negative feelings, in turn, influence their perceptions of the world, their self-worth, and their relationships with others. Various therapies are used with these types of issues; however, forgiveness therapy is one specific type of therapy that has received considerable attention of late because of its promise in helping individuals overcome interpersonal offenses, especially in decreasing negative affect such as anger, anxiety, fear, and guilt (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Fitzgibbons, 1986; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). The purpose of the current study is to examine aspects of forgiveness and the moderating effects of self-esteem in helping young women who have been victimized in their past.

1.1. *Research on forgiveness and forgiveness interventions*

Learning to forgive others has been shown to have many benefits for those who have been wronged or hurt by another person (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Fitzgibbons, 1986; McCullough et al., 2000). Unfortunately, the forgiveness literature is plagued with problems regarding the lack of consistency for defining the act of forgiveness (Lamb & Murphy, 2002). Although many definitions of forgiveness exist, the current study follows the lead of Noll (2005) by defining forgiveness as having several distinct components, which include (1) a cessation of negative feelings (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Worthington, 2003; Worthington & Wade, 1999); and (2) a prosocial change in victims toward their offender (McCullough et al., 2000), which includes a decreased motivation for vengeance and alienation from their offender (McCullough et al., 1998; Subkoviak et al., 1995).

Despite the potential importance of forgiveness in understanding the responses of individuals to victimization experiences, few experimental studies have been conducted testing forgiveness interventions among individuals with a history of victimization. McCullough and Worthington (1995) recruited male and female college students who had incurred some form of an interpersonal hurt (e.g., betrayal of trust, rejection of friendship) and exposed them either to one of two types of brief forgiveness therapy or a wait-list control. The interpersonal forgiveness therapy focused on the beneficial aspects of forgiveness on improving relations not only with the offender but also with significant others. The self-enhancement intervention focused on the long-term emotional costs to the self of withholding forgiveness and the benefits of letting go of the anger and resentment felt toward the offender.

Analyses showed significant treatment differences on four of the nine dependent variables, such that the self-enhancement intervention was superior to the interpersonal intervention or wait-list control on the scales of Conciliation, Affirmation, and reduced feelings of Revenge. Moreover, participants receiving either forgiveness intervention had greater positive affect toward the offender than participants in the control condition. These effects appeared to be maintained over six weeks.

A second study by Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Lann (2001) indicated that a relatively brief exposure to the concept of forgiving a perpetrator can produce positive emotional changes in the participants. Participants identified an offender, and then they imagined forgiving and not forgiving their offender at various times throughout the experiment. During

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