

**Forgiveness as a method of (self)healing:  
a procedural-psychological analysis**

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**Abstract**

Modern psychological approaches include forgiveness as a landmark in the healing process, considering that its benefits do not resume to mind comfort, but it also address to emotional, relational, social and general health issues. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the role of forgiveness as a coping mechanism, but also as a major focus point when dealing with healing strategies. This analytic approach intends to offer a clarified overview concerning the dimensions that forgiveness enact in human life, but also its role and functions within the acceptance – rebalance – reconciliation strategies. Moreover, incorporating this concept in guided healing and self-healing depends on the experimental evidences, but also on a good understanding forgiveness as a process, but also as a final or intermediary objective in therapy is required.

**Keywords:** forgiveness; therapy; counseling; coping; stress management; self-healing;

**Introduction**

It is necessary to analyze the role of forgiveness in the life of the individual starting from the forms of forgiveness (forgiveness as emotion, as disposition, as personality trait, as spiritual / religious landmark, as coping method, as social indication, and so on), but also its procedural modalities: to ask for forgiveness / to grant forgiveness / to receive forgiveness.

Also, in order to corroborate the phenomenon of forgiveness with its impact, we will make a distinction between the emotional, individual, subjective forgiveness and the decisional forgiveness, whose utility is generally pro-social, representing an attribute of the inter-individual pragmatism. We can define the emotional forgiveness as rooted within the individual and involving emotional experiences (Worthington, Scherer, 2004, p. 386), while the decisional forgiveness is a statement of behavioral intent, which will restore the relationship balance prior to transgression. (DiBlasio, 1998, pp. 77-78).

The argumentative approach taken will therefore follow a hypothetical background focused upon the benefits of forgiveness in the life of the individual, as follows:

1. The forgiveness is an effective form of coping in the management of reactions to stressors;
2. The emotional and decisional forgiveness are major factors in achieving a relational balance and, implicitly, in fixing pro-social attitudes;

3. The issue of forgiveness proves useful in the progress of counseling and psychotherapy in order to resolve psycho-emotional conflicts.

### **1. The dimensions of forgiveness in the life of the individual**

The definition from an operational viewpoint of the phenomenon of forgiveness as a disposition and behavioral transformation, we synthesize its intra-/interpersonal implications. The issue of forgiveness highlights a special form of reactivity found in the relationship between human subjectivities. *Such reactivity expresses a form of pro-social response* (Zmău, 2018) precisely in order to follow the concretization of a state of mental/soul balance.

However, in this context, a necessary condition for the validation of the hypotheses formulated is the analysis of the direction of approaching the concept of forgiveness, by differentiating among the self-forgiveness, the forgiveness in relation to the self and the personal forgiveness in relation to the other. In the first case, we are talking about a return to the self, about an assumption of potential, while in the other two cases we are talking about a form of acceptance, of rebalance and a relational restoration.

*The emotion, the affective is a resource in this whole process of forgiveness* (Wuthnow, 2000). Moreover, a landmark of maturation is, according to Kaufman (1984), the development of the capacity for forgiveness: both the forgiveness of the other and the forgiveness of the self. The generic purpose of forgiveness is *to restructure the perception concerning the past of the person who grants the forgiveness and to change the individual's view of the world* (Hope, 1987).

Moreover, forgiveness, along with the concept of justice, involves a series of moral arguments. *Their implications extend from individual lives to family relationships, labor productivity, communities, states and nations* (Worthington, 2015: 3). One can notice that that through forgiveness the whole human experience is reorganized, and such a process facilitates understanding. Moreover, the intercommunication is assimilated by restricting the inter-subjective space. The personal area acquires a special status (Jourard, 1964). The correlation between the forgiven and the forgiving (whatever its form, material or spiritual) is one that expresses trust. Therefore, by assuming such reciprocity, an affective, intimate process is transposed in a pragmatic plan.

### **2. Forgiveness as a method of coping**

Forgiveness is one of the possible coping responses, given the potential stressor of injustice and transgression. However, according to Worthington's theory regarding the differentiation between the act of forgiveness and reconciliation (Worthington, Sandage, 2016: 12-14), it can be argued that its impact upon a personal level engages, but is not a sufficient cause for its capitalization at social level. Therefore, we will restrict this argument to the function that

emotional forgiveness acquires as *an intrapersonal phenomenon* (Worthington, Sandage, 2016, p. 22) and we will reclassify the decision-making forgiveness as a specific method of supporting coping strategies.

Based upon the observations noted by Worthington (2006), the main premises that support the idea that forgiveness can be an optimal method of coping states that:

- the lack of forgiveness can create mental dispositions and feelings similar to those generated by stress;
- the lack of forgiveness impacts upon the relational coherence;
- the lack of forgiveness activates coping mechanisms similar to those triggered by stress.

Given that *the lack of forgiveness can respond to the same type of interventions used in stress management* (Hook et al., 2010), we reach a general agreement that *forgiveness could be conceptualized within a stress-coping theory* (Worthington, 2006). The decision of forgiveness and, implicitly, the experience of emotional transformation, on the ascending line of resentment-acceptance (Worthington, Sandage, 2016, p. 16) are the main methods of interest of this method of coping. The fact that *forgiveness is the act by which the balance is restored, by restoring a new state, in which it is not cancelled, but resorbed, integrated, resolved in terms accepted by the parties involved* (Curelaru, 2019) demonstrates its potential as a management method of situations with high stress potential.

Starting from the premise that forgiveness can be conceptualized as *an emotional juxtaposition of positive emotions, it can be used as an emotion-focused coping strategy to reduce a stressful reaction to a transgression* (Worthington, Scherer, 2004, p. 385). In this approach focused upon stress and emotions, the link between forgiveness as a coping mechanism and the health of the individual can be supported.

Beyond the state of empathy implicitly felt in the human being, forgiveness is an indicator of humanization. In other words, to forgive someone from this point of view means to forgive his personality or to forgive the deed committed to the being as such. On the one hand, to forgive one's personality means to accept one's own existence with all that personality traits, character, will, and so on encompasses. On the other hand, to forgive the deed means to put aside any form of mistake and to accept unanimously the reconciliation with the situation (from the perspective of forgiveness).

This situation would translate from a psychological point of view in terms of “reconciliation with oneself and with the other”. However, no matter how such an indicator of humanization can be interpreted, we note that beyond the moral dilemma that refers to the idea of forgiveness, in psychology, there is the concept of assuming doubt. It is a transition from empathy (mood) to a specific form of rationality (“the ability and power to overcome”). Emotions such as anger,

sadness, and disappointment can be replaced with moods such as acceptance (but not resignation), joy (but not revenge), taking on new perspectives (but not ignoring).

In other words, a surplus of positive emotion in the human being can be an indicator that “the self is aware of its own depths.” Under these conditions, the psychology of behavior must be decoded and can be decoded if it has as its starting point the idea of forgiveness. Moreover, such a perspective expresses the desire to be different, and such a need brings reconciliation with oneself and also with the other.

### **3. The functions and role of forgiveness**

The main functions of forgiveness are explored for the therapeutic potential in anger and stress management, in the psychological support provided in clinical cases (depression, anxiety, PTSD), in family and couple therapy, in philosophical and religious counseling, etc. We will first analyze the benefits of forgiveness as identified in the psychotherapeutic practice. The mental health professionals argue not only that psychotherapy can identify a number of unresolved and un-forgiven conflicts, but also that, in this case, forgiveness itself can have a therapeutic role for a number of clients (Konstam et al., 2002).

According to *the hypothesis of emotional replacement* (Worthington, 2006: 34), the forgiveness at the emotional level can be correlated with the replacement of negative emotional states, respectively their potential stressor, with positive emotions. There is a simultaneous reorientation of the center of appreciation, from oneself to others. For example, the favorable cognitive-affective repositioning of the victim in relation to the aggressor can be achieved both through a conversion of the narrative that facilitates the process of forgiveness.

Huang and Enright (2000) studied the emotional reactivity of people who had forgiven a transgressor for an interpersonal crime. The responses obtained from the study were classified according to the motivation variable. Thus, the participants stated that they granted forgiveness either for religious reasons or out of affection for the transgressor.

During the interviews in which the participants described the crime, those who forgave out of love showed smaller increases in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, demonstrating an inequality in the degree of impact, between the emotional and the decisional forgiveness. This finding supports the role of forgiveness as a way of regulating emotion and counteracting responses to stress related to anger and negative emotions in general.

A second argument of the role that forgiveness has in the life of the individual is correlated with health (both mental and physical). For example, the lack of forgiveness can be considered a stress reaction (Worthington, 2006), but also a source of stress. This double implication confirms precisely the circularity of this phenomenon: both as a result and as a premise of pernicious affective manifestations. Thus, the lack of forgiveness may be associated with

stress-like symptoms, including at the level of the sympathetic and parasympathetic reactions (Worthington & Sotoohi, 2010).

Moreover, recent studies in the field support the link between personalities prone to forgiveness and the evolution of individuals' health (Berry & Worthington, 2001: 453). For example, the experiment conducted by Al-Mabuk, Enright, and Cardis on the pro-forgiveness education identified significant correlations between forgiveness as a process and decreased anxiety rates, improved child-parent relationships, and increased levels of hope and self-esteem (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995, pp. 427-428).

Also, similar to the effects of stressors, the lack of forgiveness *has been correlated with variations in the neurohormonal reactivity* (Berry, Worthington, 2001: 452). Moreover, we can argue that forgiveness could improve health *by ensuring social support, the quality of the relationship and by adhering to religious norms* (Worthington, Scherer, 2004, p. 385), and improving the spiritual life. Therefore, *counselors can model and encourage a forgiveness-oriented attitude for clients who appear prone to anger and resentment that will help improve health* (Berry, Worthington, 2001, p.452) and avoid long-term harmful effects.

Another argument in validating the effects of forgiveness follows the implications it has in the relational management. The healing nature of forgiveness has been promoted as a primary healing factor in human-to-human relationships (Diblasio, Proctor, 1993). Also, in the case of couples, clinicians have found that mutual forgiveness can be the key to bringing clients back to a new relational beginning (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990).

Also, in the case of the parent-child relationship, it is recommended that the therapeutic process starts from the release of negative emotions through forgiveness (Diblasio, Proctor, 1993), before the corrective intervention regarding family problems. Such an approach assumes that the current dysfunctional patterns are maintained, in part, because *family members are locked in a cycle in which resentment and forgiveness are expressed covertly or directly through harmful behavior* (Diblasio, Proctor, 1993, pp.181 -182). It is thus advisable that, in the counseling process, health issues related to stress be explored through the effects of unsustainable relationships and, implicitly, by encouraging and directing forgiveness in order to reframe the Self-The Other relationship.

### **Conclusions and proposals**

The dialectic of forgiveness is supported by emotional, behavioral and cognitive evidence, and also by neurobiological evidence. Its effect on the effectiveness of therapy, on personal / intimate relationships, but also on long-term mental and physical health supports this hypothesis - Forgiveness as a psycho-effective ecology.

The importance of forgiveness in a person's life derives both from its spiritual value and from the therapeutic effect it generates at the psycho-emotional level. From a psychological point of

view, the main functions of forgiveness converge towards coping with stressors, the pro-social attitude and relational cohesion, supporting the health and well-being of the individual. Thus, we find the concept of forgiveness both in religious, philosophical or spiritual counseling, and in the psychotherapeutic practice, as a method of resolving emotional imbalances and tensions. In this context, we consider it useful to deepen the functions of forgiveness, including from a medical perspective. Also, the idea of pro-forgiveness education is a functional alternative to guidance in managing the psycho-emotional and relational profile of individuals.

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