Mental health through forgiveness: Exploring the roots and benefits

Paul Raj, C.S. Elizabeth and P. Padmakumari
HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mental health through forgiveness: Exploring the roots and benefits

Paul Raj1*, C.S. Elizabeth2 and P. Padmakumari3

Abstract: Forgiveness is conceptualized as the process of making peace with life. The three sources of forgiveness, another person, oneself, and a situation or circumstance are capable of freeing a person from a negative association to the source that has transgressed against a person. Research studies show the mental health benefits associated with forgiveness. The present study explores the experiences of adults who practice forgiveness, specifically, the indicators of forgiveness, the childhood antecedents, and the benefits of forgiving behavior. The study uses a qualitative research approach following a phenomenological framework. A total of 12 adults, ranging from 25 to 40 years of age, who received a high score on Heartland Forgiveness Scale were included in the study. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, their personal experiences were explored. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes emerged show that the childhood antecedents of forgiveness are parental influences and early childhood experiences. The indicators of forgiving behavior include positive emotional state, empathy and perspective taking, and religiosity. The themes identified are enhanced sense of well-being, improved self-acceptance, and competence to deal with challenges. Forgiveness enhanced physical and psychological well-being. The findings of the study have several implications for religious leaders, teachers, parents, mental health professionals, and trainers.

*Corresponding author: Paul Raj, Department of Psychology for B.Voc., Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Koramangala, Karnataka 560095, Bangalore, India
E-mail: boothali@gmail.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Raj is a lecturer in psychology and currently heads the Department of Psychology for B.Voc., at Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Bangalore, India. He holds a postgraduation in Counselling Psychology and an MPhil degree in Learning Disabilities. He also has an international licentiate in PREP and COGENT, two remedial programs used for the enhancement of cognitive skills in children with learning difficulties. Presently, he teaches subjects such as developmental psychology, positive psychology, psychology of personal effectiveness, basic psychology, and social psychology at the undergraduate level, apart from the guest lectures in learning disabilities and academic enrichment skills. His research areas include the development of reading and writing in children, adolescent developmental issues, management of examination anxiety, and coping strategies for school children.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Every person wants to cultivate the virtue of forgiveness. It is part of everyday interpersonal interactions. For many, it is a way of life. It is understood that the process of forgiveness helps a person to focus on the present and become optimistic about the future. The aim of the present research is based on the understanding that this virtue can be cultivated. The study proposes to explore the experiential factors promoting forgiveness in a person and gain knowledge about the positive benefits it brings to the person. Following a qualitative research, the study analyzes forgiveness as an important technique practiced for a better mental health and well-being.
1. Introduction and review of literature

Views regarding the exact nature of forgiveness vary, as different scholars defined forgiveness in different ways. But there is consensus among all of them in one aspect, that, it is beneficial to people (Worthington, 2006). Some consider forgiveness as a central trait which is capable of freeing a person from a negative association to the source that has transgressed against a person (Thompson et al., 2005). Changes in motivation are viewed as being at the core of forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000), with the person becoming more benevolent over time. The three sources of forgiveness, another person, oneself, and a situation or circumstance could be used to understand how it functions. It has a dual function—both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Forgiveness occurs in response to interpersonal violation and the person who forgives, does it in relation to someone else.

Forgiveness may be viewed as a developmental process including degrees of forgiveness which can be measured according to the degree of genuineness (Enright & North, 1998). Genuine forgiveness requires compassion, benevolence, and love for the offender, together with relinquishment of the right to revenge, resentment, and indifference. It is evident that forgiveness is important as a possible repair mechanism for the conflict that occurs in relationships.

Studies show that forgiving people differ significantly from less forgiving people on many personality attributes. Forgiving people are found less ruminative (Metts & Cupach, 1998), less narcissistic (Davidson, 1993), less exploitative, and more empathic (Tangney, Fee, Reinsmith, Boone, & Lee, 1999) than less forgiving people. In the act of forgiving, as the victims come across the positive offender, the directed emotions such as empathy, a heightened motivation to forgive another person can be anticipated (Worthington, 2006). The emotional state of the person is very crucial in determining the forgiving behavior. For example, people with positive moods feel that the experienced transgression is not a serious threat or a grave problem and thus forgivable (Marin et al., Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993).

Among many different indicators of forgiveness, studies have highlighted religiosity as one of the important pointers. Religiosity functions as an internalized socio-moral mechanism for forgiveness. In this context, the role of religion may be understood as exerting social pressures on victims to perform in a socially and morally desirable manner regardless of their religious thoughts or emotions (Mullet et al., 2003; Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). In many cultures religiosity may be influencing the forgiving behavior by stressing the socio-moral value of such an important act and providing the practitioners with the guidelines needed to adhere to those societal expectations.

Empirical findings suggest that forgiveness yields many positive results. It has been reported that forgiveness is linked to both physical and mental aspects of health. According to Newberg, d’Aquili, Newberg, and deMarici (2000) there are possible advantages of forgiving behavior as a consequence of the body’s stress response to an injury against the self. In the process of the nervous system acting to resolve an apparent injustice through parasympathetic activity such as meditation, there would be significant physiological and psychological advancements such as reduced heart rate, comfortable breathing, lower levels of anxiety, depression, hostility, and anger and increased self-esteem.

In various studies conducted among college students, forgiveness was found positively connected to global mental health and relationship quality (Berry & Worthington, 2001), and hope (Rye et al., 2000). High self-esteem and low levels of anxiety and depression were the results of higher levels of forgiveness among elderly women (Hebl & Enright, 1993). Parents who were high on forgiveness
were also high on self-esteem, positive parenting styles, and lower anxiety and depression among college students (Al-Mabuk & Enright, 1995). Clinical forgiveness interventions also show a significant benefit of practicing forgiveness.

Freedman and Enright (1996) implemented forgiveness interventions to the survivors of incest. After the intervention, women survivors reported significant increases on measures of forgiveness and hope, and significant decreases on measures of anxiety and depression in comparison to their pretreatment scores. This stage model, which is used for adults, involved four different stages of forgiveness. The first stage, the uncovering stage, emphasized on the understanding and control of anger. In the second stage, the decision stage, psycho-education about forgiveness and its positive outcomes to the victim, resulting in a decision to give up resentment or even display compassion toward the transgressor were highlighted. In the third stage, the work stage, clients gained understanding of the transgressor and his or her life circumstances that facilitated the transgression. By the time the client reaches the third and final stage of deepening, he/she finds increasing meaning in the suffering, feels more connected with others, and experiences decreased negative affect and, at times, renewed purpose in life.

Another similar intervention study on forgiveness was done by Coyle and Enright (1997) on 10 men who reported as having felt hurt by their parents' decision for abortion. The findings showed that after the completion of forgiveness intervention, these men reported significant increases in forgiveness behavior and significant decreases in negative emotions such as grief, anger, and anxiety. In a study of adult population of USA, Toussaint, Williams, Musick, and Everson (2001) reported that forgiveness of the self and others was positively related to life satisfaction. Similarly, Krause and Ellison (2003) and Seybold, Hill, Neumann, and Chi (2001) also documented that forgiveness predicted positive mental health among the respondents.

Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, and Kluwer (2003) conducted an experimental study on adults where they manipulated forgiveness and measured its effects on well-being. The findings show that forgiveness displayed in marital relationships characterized by strong interpersonal commitment was connected with satisfaction with life, positive emotions, decreased negative emotions, and high self-esteem. The study further reveals that inability to forgive in such relationships leads to frustration and tension which may play a mediating role between anger and forgiveness.

Forgiveness as an antidote for the negative effects of hostility is evidenced in many studies (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Laan, 2001). The positive benefits of forgiveness were displayed in enhanced marital quality, increased likelihood of future forgiveness, stronger commitment to the relationship, and less rumination about whether the offending partner apologized (Fincham & Beach, 2004; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). The positive effects of forgiveness are shown in many studies in terms of preventing the development of psychiatric problems and decreasing negative feelings, and increasing positive feelings in war veterans (Kararrmak & Güloğlu, 2014). Forgiveness is shown to aid psychological healing through positive changes in affect (West, 2001).

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to generate more information and knowledge regarding the way the concept of forgiveness is perceived by forgiving people. The understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and mental health as explored in the present qualitative study, thus, aims to build on previously published research which has already been discussed and illustrated on how forgiveness as a positive trait can be enhanced and optimized. Moreover, from the review of literature, it is certain that most of the studies on forgiveness use quantitative methods focusing on the efficacy of interventions. However, it is equally important to identify characteristics of people who are forgiving and explore their life conditions which paved the way for the enhancement of forgiveness. The knowledge thus derived could be used to develop effective programs that are most compatible with their cognitive perspectives and life circumstances. Thus the present study attempts to fill the research gap by sharing the vivid experiences of people who embrace forgiveness.
Within the framework of positive psychology, forgiveness is recognized as a character strength and as a way to improve well-being and meaning in life and using this paradigm, this study also through the participant’s narratives would throw light on the circumstances and paybacks which serve as stronger motivators of forgiveness for them.

2. Research questions

(1) What are the indicators of forgiving behavior?
(2) What are the childhood antecedents of forgiveness?
(3) What are the benefits of forgiveness?

3. Method

3.1. Research paradigm

This study used an interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research was used in this study because it helps the researcher to do an in-depth analysis of people’s behaviors, attitudes, concerns, values, aspirations, motivations, and lifestyles. While doing a qualitative research, every researcher seeks to find how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In this context, the present study attempted to explore different dimensions of forgiveness through understanding the experiences of forgiving people which is best answered by qualitative method for its ability to explain accurately the insightfulness and the meaning people attach to their experiences (Morrow & Smith, 2000). From a phenomenological perspective, the description of experiences is essential in really understanding the processes and meaning that individuals attach to their life. Using this research paradigm to guide, the current study has assisted in filling the gap on literature on the understanding of childhood antecedents and mental health benefits of forgiveness.

3.2. Participants

The participants selected for the study were 12 adults who have scored high on Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005). The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 40. Initially the Heartland Forgiveness Scale was administered to a group of 50 adults, both males \((N = 11)\) and females \((N = 39)\) who were selected though purposive sampling. These participants were married adults having children. They all had completed their graduation and employed. Only 16 adults, out of which there were 2 males and 14 females, were finalized on the basis of their score on the scale. These participants had experienced some adverse transgressing situations in the past and this criterion is used to select the final list. After screening and obtaining consent, the final participant list included only 12 married working women who hailed from the urban sector. Seven participants identified themselves as practicing Christianity and five of them, practicing Hinduism.

3.3. Measures and procedure

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the administration of the measures. After the participants signed on the informed consent form, the socio-demographic profile was administered. Finally, the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005) was used to identify the participants who are high on forgiveness. It is a self-report questionnaire, consisting of 18 items that measure the individual’s general tendency to be forgiving, rather than forgiving of a particular event or person. The scale has proved to be having sound psychometric properties. The Cronbach’s alpha is in fluctuation from 0.76 to 0.83 (Akbari, Golparvar, & Kamkar, 2008).

An in-depth interview schedule was used to collect data. In-depth interview was selected because the area of interest is complex (Smith, 1995) and involved the experiences of forgiving people. The development and validation of interview schedule included the following steps. The interview protocol and guide was developed after conducting a thorough review of the literature on forgiveness. An informal interview with three members of the target population was conducted. Based on the data collected from the informal interview, some relevant modifications were made in the interview
guide. Then, a provisional interview schedule was prepared. The interview schedule thus prepared was given to three experts—a senior member of target population and two subject experts. The final interview schedule was prepared by incorporating the suggestions and feedback given by the experts.

The interview guide included questions regarding the participants’ childhood experiences, incidents, strengths, challenges, coping strategies, and other aspects of experiences. The focus was on subjective interpretation and the meanings they make of their lives. The interviews were conducted at venues convenient to the participants. Socio-demographic information was collected. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h. The entire interview schedule was recorded and later transcribed.

3.4. Data analysis
The data were analyzed using thematic network analysis which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A consistent guide of thematic analysis explained by Ritchie, Spencer, and O’Connor (2003) was followed during the analysis.

Based on the objectives of the study, a thematic framework was developed, the raw data were indexed using thematic framework, materials with similar content or properties were sorted out and a thematic chart was plotted. Similarities and differences between various emerging themes were established and a coherent logical structure was displayed using the conceptual map. Basic themes were matched using sets of linkages to form organizing themes and groups of organizing themes were classified under a global theme.

The following strategies were adopted to increase the trustworthiness of results. Some participants were approached more than once to achieve prolonged engagement which also increased the credibility (Byrne, 2001). Each participant was invited to make any changes they felt necessary to ensure confidentiality. Purposive sampling also increased transferability (Byrne, 2001). Rich descriptions of data and field notes were maintained.

3.5. Ethical consideration
Informed consent form was given to the interviewee for participation in the study. This included agreeing to get the interview audiotaped, analyze interview transcripts successively for material that might violate confidentiality in the case of published verbatim extracts. The participants were given the freedom to leave the study if they felt uncomfortable or wished to skip any questions. Confidentiality of the responses and names of the interviewees were maintained. The participants were informed beforehand that although quotes would be used in the final write-up for the research article, all identifying information about themselves (names, places, etc.) would not be revealed while transcribing the data and in the final write-up.

4. Results
The first objective of the study was to explore the indicators of forgiveness (Table 1, Figure 1). The following themes were emerged.
Figure 1. Thematic network on indicators of forgiving behavior.

Table 1. Thematic framework on factors indicating forgiving behavior

| Global themes                | Organizing themes                               | Basic themes                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Positive emotional state    | Happiness and contentment                        | (1) Happiness in the present situation                                      |
|                             |                                                 | (2) Calm and relaxed in life                                                |
|                             |                                                 | (3) Even tempered and passionate about life                                 |
| Empathy and Perspective taking | Experience the feeling of other                  | (1) Identification with the transgressor                                    |
|                             | Anticipation of other person’s thoughts          | (2) Taking responsibility for one’s thoughts, feelings and behavior         |
|                             |                                                 | (3) Situation is to be blamed, not the person                               |
|                             |                                                 | (4) Observing the action and situation without judgment and evaluation      |
| Religiosity                 | Conscience and trust in God                      | (1) Feeling of guilt if not able to forgive others                          |
|                             |                                                 | (2) Belief that God will forgive everybody for their mistakes               |
|                             |                                                 | (3) Religious beliefs influence life                                        |
The second objective of the study was to understand the childhood antecedents of forgiveness (Table 2, Figure 2) and the following themes were emerged.

### Table 2. Thematic framework on childhood antecedents of forgiveness

| Global themes        | Organizing themes                  | Basic themes                                                                 |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parental influence   | Parents being role models           | (1) Parents are perceived as forgiving                                        |
|                      | Good child rearing practices        | (2) Good and consistent disciplining practices are followed                   |
|                      |                                    | (3) Appropriate rewards for forgiving are given                               |
| Childhood experiences| Experience of adversity             | (1) Many difficulties encountered in the past                                 |
|                      | Resilience                         | (2) Experience of bouncing back                                               |
|                      |                                    | (3) Rewarding experiences in the form of positive outcomes                   |

### Figure 2. Thematic network on childhood antecedents of forgiveness.
The themes emerged for the third objective on the benefits of forgiveness are given in Table 3 and Figure 3.

### Table 3. Thematic framework on outcome of forgiveness

| Global themes                        | Organizing themes                                                                 | Basic themes                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Enhanced sense of well-being        | Emotionally balanced                                                             | (1) Improved health and resistance                                          |
|                                      | Lower levels of anxiety and anger                                                 | (2) Able to respond with calmness and less anxiety                          |
|                                      | Good interpersonal relationships                                                  | (3) Optimum physiological arousal even in difficult situation               |
|                                      |                                                                                  | (4) Able to repair damaged relationships                                     |
| Self-acceptance                      | Positive regard for self                                                         | (1) Adding meaning and purpose to life                                       |
|                                      | Self-regulation                                                                  | (2) Increased understanding of self                                          |
|                                      |                                                                                  | (3) Appreciating and accepting one’s positives                               |
|                                      |                                                                                  | (4) Reflecting one’s self to understand mistakes                            |
| Competence to deal with challenges   | Problem focused coping                                                           | (1) Reappraising the situations, preparing and following an action plan     |
|                                      |                                                                                  | (2) Taking control and responsibility                                        |
|                                      |                                                                                  | (3) Information seeking to see challenges as opportunity to grow             |

**Figure 3. Thematic network on outcome of forgiveness.**
5. Discussion

5.1. Indicators of forgiving behavior

5.1.1. Positive emotional state
Experience of positive emotions is very much necessary to let things go and for being a forgiving person. Those who are forgiving had a mixture of pleasant emotions in their personal and professional lives. Experiencing positive affect may be a consequence of not keeping grudges within themselves and it is very important as it influences their personal and professional growth. It can also be considered as an indicator of making peace with life. Experiencing positive emotions has certain physiological benefits as it improves the functioning of cardiovascular system. Besides, it increases the likelihood of experiencing positive emotions in future (Fredrickson, 2003).

In the study, each participant felt that they were calm and relaxed in life in general, and they were able to deal with their emotions in a constructive way. All of them reported that they felt happy and contented in their present life. They felt that each time they went through a difficult situation, they let themselves experience the emotions, but let the negative effects go as they tried to resolve it. They added that keeping a happy face is a way of finding meaning in their life and they enjoyed the present moment. They believed that they are contented as result of their personal achievements. "I generally find myself enjoying the way life turns out. See, I try focusing more on good things happening every day, instead of worrying over bad moments. Whenever I have to deal with hard situations, I give it a try resolving it as objectively as possible, go through the situation, but never let me get so much affected. That is the way I remain happy and peaceful" (P6, personal communication).

Participants validated their positive affect by saying that it is important for them to feel happy and content in life as it will be reflected in the way they go about doing the daily activities of their life. They wanted to feel happy and satisfied and it appeared as if they made an effort to feel so. They said that they do not have any regret about their past decisions and happenings. Participant two also repeatedly reported experiencing calm and peace in her interview, for instance, “Feeling inwardly calm and enjoying life at the present moment that I can live passionately and when I try regulating my emotions, life becomes more enjoyable.”

5.1.2. Empathy and perspective taking
Empathy is found to play a very significant role in the healing process of forgiveness (Enright & North, 1998). Most of the participants said that they were able to identify with the transgressor and it might have helped them to forgive the wrongdoing. Even if others showed negative behavior towards them, the participants conveyed the message that the situation was to be blamed, not the person. They were able to accept others as they were with their weakness and potentialities. Only when a person recognizes how she felt in a similar situation, can she assume how someone must be feeling in his or her own situation.

Even if some mistakes were committed by people around them, they had a tendency to see it in a positive light. For example, “I know the mistakes people make and I make it a point not to exaggerate it. I never blame myself or others because I know to err is human and I would have done the same harm if I were in that situation” (P6, personal communication). This view point is supported by previous research (Worthington et al., 2000).

Such experiences were narrated by participants in which they supported others and the responsibility of mishaps on context. When a victim takes another’s perspective by putting himself in the offender’s shoes, he is able to substitute emotions for his problems, leading to increased healing. This perspective taking approach suggests a process of making associations at mental level between one person’s emotional state and one’s own past experience (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991;
Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001). It was reflected in many participants’ explanations of how they dealt with the difficult situations.

5.1.3. Religiosity
Religiosity is considered pertinent in forgiving behavior because one’s own religious principles encouraged him/her to forgive others and the situations which are not fully under their control. It is likely that the more religious a person is, the more likely he or she will forgive others’ mistakes. Participants opined that people who are religious may feel guilty about their sins when they are unable to forgive others, which indicates that they have high levels of conscience. Many expressed the view point that their responses towards a transgressor could be different and that they put their trust into God and consequently will forgive themselves and others more easily. In his study, Neto (2007) indicates that religiosity, to some extent, predicts the positive pervasive tendency toward forgiveness and negative approach toward continuous hatred which is also supporting the participant's viewpoints.

Participants said that they are able to use religiosity to morally justify their current motivations toward an offender. P4, who believes in Christianity, expressed her attitude and outlook by saying that if she does not forgive the other person, she might feel guilty, disappointed, and depressed and as result, she/he is more likely to commit more sins than before. “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life and God gives me strength to forgive the offender. I trust in God and feel that he will take care of me if I forgive other people” (P4, personal communication).

Participant 1 said that her beliefs and practices in Hinduism made her realize the value of life and practice the virtue of forgiveness, for instance, “I believe in what Bhagavad Gita says, forgive the unavoidable. I have learned to forgive others and ask for forgiveness as it is taught to me.” This theme is supported by previous research findings (Von Krosigk, 2000).

5.2. Antecedents of forgiveness

5.2.1. Parental influence
The development of forgiveness traits may be influenced by many factors including the early childhood experiences. Participants narrated the instances where their parents had displayed forgiving behavior in different situations and encouraged their children to practice the same. Participants stated that they felt motivated at the encouragement received from the parents. “I had the experience of mother having been treated badly by the family and she was diagnosed with leukemia. The extended family made her do all the work in spite of her illness. I used to feel bad about it. My mother used to tell me to forgive but it was hard for me to do so. But now as I look back, I don’t have any hard feelings towards them” (P5, personal communication).

Participants P7, P10, and P12 also gave similar accounts about their parents. In addition to parents being forgiving, they were also putting in efforts to inculcate in their children the virtue of forgiveness, and they were seen as perfect role models for learning. P7 narrated how she admired and respected the way her parents handled each conflicting situation. She learned observing the contribution of her parents. She got motivated to let hard feelings go and more of forgiving by the encouragement from the parents.

5.2.2. Childhood experiences
Most of the participants perceived their childhood experiences as a critical factor which fostered a sense of forgiveness in them. They went through difficult situations where forgiving was inevitable. “Father went missing for a month without informing anybody, came back on his own, it was very hard for us to accept and forgive at that point of time. But gradually I was able to empathize with him and understand the circumstances which forced him to do that. This particular experience became a critical factor for me to look at other people’s behavior from a new perspective and I think that made a huge difference in my life.” (P3, personal communication).
According to the respondents, the hard situations in their childhood enabled them to overcome obstacles which come a long way to forgiveness. Experiences involving hardships and agony can make a person resilient and bring more courage and power to deal with similar situations but in a more constructive healthy way. Participants agreed that the learning they gained from early childhood experiences shaped their perception of people and events. They started enjoying the benefits associated with forgiving behavior. “I think that if I fall back on something again and again, it affects my life. Internally I feel that I can’t face the world. So I may not be able to make eye contact with other people. So looking at the incident as a learning experience, it helps me become more positive. So, next time, if such an incident happens, I will be more conscious. And, if I don’t show negative feelings and remain calm over a period of time, it will become a part of me.” (P10, personal communication).

Other participants also shared their experiences of benefiting from childhood challenges and difficulties.

5.3. Benefits of forgiveness

5.3.1 Enhanced sense of well-being

A sense of well-being is very important to have a fulfilling life and most participants agreed to that. They opined that whenever they forgive others, there is a sense of a burden being lifted and in turn, they experience more positive emotions and this pathway in turn leads to enhanced sense of well-being. Therefore, forgiveness can lead to improved psychological and physical well-being and to a deepening of relationship with the transgressor.

P8 at various instances revealed of experiencing a transition from being aggressive to more peaceful and emotionally mature. For instance, “Previously, I used to feel very sad or guilty about things, I used to be sad about the way I was treated. So I used to get very emotional about these things but after I started realizing the need to forgive and let it go, I became wise and matured and didn’t take things so emotionally or didn’t take things so much to my heart and I could see a change. Also, a sense of satisfaction results from this.”

P6 sounded similar views when she said, “I think whenever I forgave or asked for forgiveness, I tried to put my pride aside and show humility. I was able to empathize with the other person and to my surprise I felt contented and extremely happy over what I did.” Research also shows that forgiveness of the self and others was directly and positively related to one’s life satisfaction (Toussaint et al., 2001).

Participants said that forgiveness contributed greatly to their personal growth. They had become more open, less rigid, and emotionally stable, developed overall relationship satisfaction, and attained a sense of purpose and meaning in life. “I have changed a lot. 70% wellbeing has been achieved. Earlier I used to blame myself. Now I understand that it might be because of the situation or other people. I am more in control of my thoughts. And I accept that everybody has some positives in them. So I accept them unconditionally. Forgiveness had played a role in managing myself and others” (P5, personal communication).

P2 also shared views on how she was able to repair the damaged relationships. “Sometimes that might be better off that the other person does that reflection and find out rather than me pushing behind them. Then I received an email saying that ‘I am sorry I hurt you. But, that was not my intention. You have the freedom to do what you think is right. I wish you the best.’ That is the way I dealt with it and that was done” (P2, personal communication).

5.3.2. Self-acceptance

The positive outcomes of forgiveness include the improved sense of self-acceptance too. Most participants agreed that they possessed a positive attitude towards themselves, and felt content about past life. Participants spoke about the ways they looked into themselves. They took time to reflect on their performance and the impact of their forgiving behavior. For them, reflection was an ongoing process. “When I look back, I am quite pleased with how things have turned out so far for me. I have
analyzed each situation rationally, responded appropriately without making any effort to react intensely, and tried to manage my emotions even when I was going through difficult situations” (P1, personal communication).

Self-acceptance through self-reflection also helps in realizing one’s mistakes and working on them. P8 said reflections on how she handles interpersonal conflicts helped her become a mature person, which in turn enabled her to experience more peace. Even other participants opined that being able to accept themselves added more meaning and purpose to their lives and whenever they encountered difficult and uncontrollable situations they tended to think that certain unforeseen and unfortunate happenings were destined to happen. This thought enabled them to forgive the other person involved in the situation. Accepting, respecting, and forgiving were significant in the lives of these participants to have peace with oneself and only then they could move forward in life. So they had to leave out grudges against self or others to achieve peace.

5.3.3. Competence to deal with challenge
Practicing forgiveness may reap such benefits that the person develops strengths and optimizes the talents to deal effectively with life’s challenges. Participants opined that practicing forgiveness helped them to develop competency to appraise the difficult interpersonal situation more realistically and use effective coping strategies. This involved accepting responsibility for solving the problems, seeking accurate information about problems, developing action plans to solve the problems, and having an optimistic view of one’s capacity to solve problems. Some of the participants reported that they make conscious effort to minimize on personal threats by taking responsibility and control the situation as much as they could.

They saw the best in every situation they encountered. P6 said how she had learnt to accept situations because of the way she looked at challenging situations in her life and she understands that forgiveness was very much needed in order to have a peaceful life. She felt it took some time for everything to fall into place. Participants said that they had belief in their effort and skills. The efficacy belief helped them sail through the problem.

P9 narrated an instance when she was able to deal with a conflicting situation with a friend where forgiving was necessary. She said that when she was ready to look at the issue in a different perspective, it was easy for her to deal with it. “I looked at the situation very objectively and realized that it had to be dealt with in a mature and rational fashion. I gained more understanding of that difficult interpersonal situation and I can tell undoubtedly that such strength derived from the patience and forgiving nature and now I feel very confident in dealing with any challenging situation.” (P9, personal communication).

A review of the findings in the form of themes demonstrate that it is in line with the previous theoretical and empirical studies suggesting the benefits of forgiveness as improved well-being (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Orcutt, 2006; Toussaint & Jorgensen, 2008; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer, 2002; Worthington, Berry, & Parrot, 2001). Although previous theoretical models identified different developmental stages of forgiveness and yet, there is a dearth of research on the childhood antecedents. This study explored the importance of early influences in one’s life in cultivating forgiveness. This study is unique in terms of revealing the mental health profile of forgiving people through their narratives.

Although this study fulfilled its objectives by providing answers to the research questions framed, it is not without limitations and its findings therefore should be used cautiously. The participants in this study were female and another study with more evenly distributed number of males and females would serve the purpose of understanding the gender influences in forgiving behavior. This study had not explored the multidimensional aspects of forgiveness, like forgiveness of self, the other and the situation, and future studies could examine the association between these specific dimensions and well-being. The themes emerged out of the data as benefits of forgiveness could be
treated as predictors of forgiveness in future studies. A study of a similar nature could be replicated using a more diverse and large sample including different religious and cultural groups. A similar qualitative investigation involving participant interviews investigating the ways forgiveness reaps mental health benefits would reveal more information regarding the use of cognitive strategies which aid in the process of forgiveness.

6. Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, we can say that the study has identified three indicators of forgiveness which included the ability of the individual to experience positive emotions, empathy, and perspective taking and religiosity. The childhood antecedents of happiness identified from the data were parental influences and childhood experiences. Enhanced sense of well-being, self-acceptance, and competence to deal with challenges were the outcomes of forgiveness as perceived by the participants.

The findings of this study have several implications for practitioners, parents, and mental health professionals. The important finding in the current study that positive emotions contribute to the ability for the individuals to recover from negative emotional experiences of transgression, is relevant in examining the health promoting qualities linked with forgiveness. It seems useful to understand how positive emotions might contribute to the development of character strengths. The role of parents in helping the children in cultivating forgiveness which emerged from the data is a very significant finding and this has implications for parents and educators. This indicate that children would need to grow up with models of forgiveness found in parents and other influential people, such as teachers in school and religious institutions. The theme of religiosity indicates that, forgiveness plays an important role both in accepting God’s forgiveness for personal sin as well as maintaining loving relationships within one’s own religious community. It reiterates the role each religion plays in fostering forgiveness in those who practice it.

These findings could be applied in creating a positive environment, especially for children during their critical period of personality development. Forgiveness enhances personal growth and reaps many positive benefits in terms of enhancing physical and psychological well-being. The information gained through the interview that the process of forgiveness not only reduces the emotional distress associated with past hurts and offenses but enhanced more contentment and satisfaction in letting things go could be used to enhance optimal functioning in an individual. These findings also have significant implications as they help one to have an understanding of the influences of forgiveness on mental health which could further be applied toward the cultivation and practicing of forgiveness.

The present study sample is very small. And also forgiveness of self is not covered in the present study which can be considered in a large sample. Situational factors that influence forgiveness at a given point of time can be identified and discussed further. The level and intensity of relationship of the forgiver with the transgressor may be addressed in future research. Contributions of different religions towards forgiveness and the differences, if any, may be studied in detail.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interest.

Author details
Paul Raj1
E-mail: boothali@gmail.com
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4743-5370
C.S. Elizabeth2
E-mail: cseliza@yahoo.com
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7434-6907
P. Padmakumari3
E-mail: padma.kumari@christuniversity.in

ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4705-7963

1 Department of Psychology for B.Voc., Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Koramangala, Bangalore, Karnataka 560095, India.
2 Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Koramangala, Bangalore, Karnataka 560095, India
3 Department of Psychology, Christ University, Hosur Road, Bangalore, Karnataka 560029, India.

Citation information
Cite this article as: Mental health through forgiveness: Exploring the roots and benefits, Paul Raj, C.S. Elizabeth & P. Padmakumari, Cogent Psychology (2016), 3: 1153817.

Cover image
Source: Authors.
References

Akbari, M., Golparvar, M., & Kamkar, M. (2008). The relationship between interpersonal trusts, forgiveness, self-efficacy and religiosity with procedural and distributive beliefs of a just world. Danesho Ve Pehouehesh in Psychology, 30, 53–80.

Al-Mabuk, R., & Enright, R. (1995). Forgiveness education with parentally love-deprived late adolescents. Journal of Moral Education, 24, 427–444.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305724950240405

Berry, J. W., & Worthington, E. L. (2001). Forgivingness, relationship quality, stress while imagining relationship events, and physical and mental health. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 48, 447–455.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.48.4.447

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3, 77–101. ISSN 1478-0887.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Byrne, M. M. (2001). Linking philosophy, methodology, and methods in qualitative research. AORN Journal, 73, 207–210. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0001-2092(06)62088-7

Coyle, C., & Enright, R. (1997). Forgiveness intervention with postabortion men. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 65, 1044–1046.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.65.6.1042

Davidson, D. L. (1993). Forgiveness and narcissism: Consistency in experience across real and hypothetical situations. Dissertation Abstracts International, 54, 27–46.

Dezenz, K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2008). Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Eisenberg, N., Shea, C. L., Carlo, G., & Knight, G. (1991). Empathy-related responding and cognition: A “chicken and the egg” dilemma. In W. Kurtines & J. Gewirtz (Eds.), Handbook of moral behavior and development (Vol. 2 Research, pp. 63–88). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Enright, R., & Coyle, C. (1998). Researching the process model of forgiveness within interventions. In E. L. Worthington Jr (Ed.), Dimensions of forgiveness: psychological, research and theological perspectives (pp. 139–161). Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation.

Enright, R. D., & North, J. (1998). Introducing forgiveness. In I. R. E. D. J. North (Ed.), Exploring forgiveness (pp. 3–8). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. (2004). Forgiveness in marriage: Implications for psychological aggression and constructive communication. Personal Relationships, 9, 239–251.

Finkel, E. J., Rusbult, C. E., Kumsrisito, M., & Hannon, P. A. (2002). Dealing with betrayal in close relationships: Does commitment promote forgiveness? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82, 956–974.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.956

Fredrickson, B. L. (2003). The value of positive emotions. American Scientist, 91, 330–335. Retrieved July 31, 2012, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/27858244

http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-6994.00003

Freedman, S., & Enright, R. (1996). Forgiveness as an intervention goal with incest survivors. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 64, 983–989.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.64.5.983

Hebl, J. H., & Enright, R. D. (1993). Forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal with elderly females. Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 30, 658–667. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.30.4.658

Karremans, J., & Güloğlu, B. (2014). Forgiveness and PTSD among veterans. The mediating role of anger and negative affect. Psychiatry Research, 219, 536–542.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2014.05.024

Karremans, J., Van Lange, P., Ouwerkerk, J., & Kluever, E. (2003). When forgiving enhances psychological well-being: The role of interpersonal commitment. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84, 1011–1026.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.5.1011

Krause, N., & Ellison, C. (2003). Forgiveness by god, forgiveness of others, and psychological well-being in late life. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 42, 77–93.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2003.00041.x

Lasyon, S., & Eisenberg, N. (2001). Affective empathy. In J. A. H. F. J. Bernieri (Ed.), Interpersonal sensitivity: theory and measurement (pp. 21–46). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Martin, L. L., Ward, D. W., Achee, J. W., & Wyr, R. S. (1993). Mood as input: People have to interpret the motivational implications of their moods. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64, 317–326.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.64.3.317

McCullough, M. E., Pargament, K. I., & Thoresen, C. (2000). The psychology of forgiveness: History, conceptual issues, and overview. In M. E. McCullough, K. Pargament, & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice (pp. 1–14). New York, NY: Guildford.

Mets, S., & Cupach, W. R. (1998). Predictors of forgiveness following a relational transgression. Paper presented at the 9th International Conference on Personal Relationships, Saratoga Springs, NY.

Morrow, S. L., & Smith, M. L. (2000). Qualitative research for counseling psychology. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), Handbook of counseling psychology (3rd ed., pp. 199–230). New York, NY: Wiley.

Mullet, E., Barros, J., Veronicou Usai, L., Neto, F., Riviere Shafigghi, S., & Shafigghi, S. R. (2003). Religious involvement and the forgiving personality. Journal of Personality, 71, 1–19.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.010003

Neto, F. (2007). Forgiveness, personality and gratitude. Personality and Individual Differences, 43, 2313–2323.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.07.010

Newberg, A. B., d’Aquili, E. G., Newberg, S. K., & deMarici, V. (2000). The neuropsychological correlates of forgiveness. In M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice (pp. 91–110). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Orcutt, H. K. (2006). The prospective relationship of interpersonal forgiveness and psychological distress symptoms among college women. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53, 350–361. doi:10.1037/0008-0186.53.3.350

Polear, F. G., Regalia, C., & Fincham, F. (2005). Marital quality, forgiveness, empathy, and rumination: A longitudinal analysis. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31, 368–378. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271597

Ritchie, J., Spencer, L., & O’Connor, W. (2003). Carrying out qualitative analysis. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds), Qualitative research practice (pp. 219–262). New Delhi: Sage.

Rye, M., Pargament, K. I., Ali, M., Beck, G., Dorff, E., Hollissey, C., ... Williams, J. G. (2000). Religious perspectives on forgiveness. In M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice (pp. 17–40). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Seybold, K. S., Hill, P. C., Neumann, J. K., & Chi, D. S. (2001). Physiological and psychological correlates of forgiveness. Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 20, 250–259.

Smith, J. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), Rethinking methods in psychology (pp. 9–52). London: Sage.

Tangney, J., Fee, R., Reinsmith, C., Boone, A. L., & Lee, N. (1999). Assessing individual differences in the propensity to forgive. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA.

Thompson, L. Y., Snyder, C. R., Hoffman, L., Michael, S. T., Rasmussen, H. N., Billings, L. S., ... Roberts, D. E. (2005).
Dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations. Journal of Personality, 73, 313–360.

Toussaint, L., & Jorgensen, K. M. (2008). Inter-parental conflict, parent-child relationship quality, and adjustment in Christian adolescents: Forgiveness as a mediating variable. Journal of Psychology & Christianity, 27, 337–346. Retrieved from http://caps.net/membership/publications/jpc

Toussaint, L., Williams, D., Musick, M., & Everson, S. (2001). Forgiveness and health: Age differences in a U.S. probability sample. Journal of Adult Development, 8, 249–257. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1011394629736

Tsang, J., McCullough, M. E., & Hoyt, W. T. (2005). Psychometric and rationalization accounts of the religion-forgiveness discrepancy. Journal of Social Issues, 61, 785–805. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00432

Von Krosigk, B. C. (2000). Exploring forgiveness: A narrative approach to stories of hurt (Unpublished master’s dissertation). Pretoria: UNISA.

West, W. (2001). Issues relating to the use of forgiveness in counselling and psychotherapy. British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 29, 415–423. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069880120085000

Witvliet, C. V. O., Ludwig, T. E., & Loan, K. L. (2001). Granting forgiveness or harboring grudges: Implications for emotion, physiology, and health. Psychological Science, 12, 117–123. doi:10.1111/1467-9280.00320

Witvliet, C. V. O., Ludwig, T. E., & Bauer, D. J. (2002). Please forgive me: Transgressors’ emotions and physiology during imagery of seeking forgiveness and victim responses. Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 21, 219–233.

Worthington, Jr. E. L. (2006). Forgiveness and reconciliation: Theory and application (pp. 170–171). New York, NY: Routledge.

Worthington, Jr. E. L., Kurusu, T., Collins, W., Berry, J. W., Ripley, J. S., & Baier, S. N. (2000). Forgiving usually takes time: A lesson learned by studying interventions to promote forgiveness. Journal of Psychology and Theology, 28, 3–20.

Worthington, Jr. E. L., Berry, J. W., & Porro, L., III (2001). Unforgiveness, forgiveness, religion and health. In T. G. Plante, & A. C. Sherman (Eds.), Faith and health: Psychological perspectives (pp. 107–138). New York, NY: Guilford Press.