The mediating role of anger in the forgiveness-mental health link

Jichan J Kim, PhD
Department of Psychology
Liberty University

Introduction

- Forgiveness is a moral virtue that one practices when unjustly hurt by another. It involves both abandoning resentment and developing goodwill toward the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Forgiving is choosing love when others have withdrawn love from you.
- Forgiveness outcomes are not to be equated with the essence of what forgiveness is; however, empirically-supported forgiveness pathways have shown to decrease anger, anxiety, and depression and to increase self-esteem and hopefulness for the future (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014).
- Foragers are likely to experience such benefits by learning to cope with unforgiveness or delayed negative emotions, one of which includes lasting anger/resentment (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).
- Lawler et al.'s (2015) study supported the mediating role of a reduction in negative affect in the relationship between forgiveness and physical health; however, no study has focused the mediating role of anger (in particular) in explaining the relationship between forgiveness and other psychological health benefits.
- Therefore, this study was aimed at testing the mediating role of anger in the relationship between forgiveness and anxiety, depression, hope, and self-esteem, as well as to explore the role of forgiveness on self-esteem and hope.

Participants and Procedure

- A total of 202 college students (Male = 34; Female = 168) with a mean age of 19.87 (SD = 3.92), majoring in Psychology at a large non-profit university in Central Virginia, provided data for the current analysis by filling out an online survey that included self-report measures on forgiveness, anger, anxiety, depression, hope, and self-esteem.
- All participants identified themselves as Christian of various denominations/sects.
- 82.7% of the participants (n = 167) identified themselves as White (African American = 6.9%, Latino/Hispanic = 4%, Asian = 3%, Native American = .5%, and Others = 3%).
- All analyses were conducted using Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS macro (version 3) in SPSS (Version 23).

Measures

- **Forgiveness.** Participants filled out the 30-item Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Subkoviak et al., 1995), which is a measure of participants’ affect, behavior, and cognition toward the offender. After recalling their most recent experience of being hurt, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 6-point Likert scale.
- **Anger, anxiety, and depression.** Participants filled out 5-item anger, 6-item anxiety, and 6-item depression short forms from Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System, indicating the frequency of said emotions felt within the past 7 days on a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) (PROMIS; Cell et al., 2010).
- **Hope.** Participants filled out 12-item Adult Hope Scale (AHS; Synder et al., 1991), rating each item on a scale of 1 (Definitely false) to 8 (Definitely true). Four items were filler items, and the remaining 8-items indicated participants’ hope for the future.
- **Self-esteem.** Participants filled out 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), indicating to what extent they agree with each item on a scale of 1 (Strongly agree) to 4 (Strongly agree). After reverse coding five negatively-worded items, all items were reverse scored to make higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

Discussion

- After controlling for gender, offense severity, and time since the offense, the indirect effects of anger on all outcome variables were supported: Anxiety (a*b = -.0121, 95% bootstrap CI [-.0243 to -.0034]), depression (a*b = -.0177, 95% bootstrap CI [.0332 to -.0057]), hope (a*b = .0084, 95% bootstrap CI [.0007 to .0209]), and self-esteem (a*b = .0136, 95% bootstrap CI [.0040 to .0263]).
- A direct effect of forgiveness on hope (c’ = .0417, 95% bootstrap CI [.0084 to .0749]) and a total effect of forgiveness on hope (a*b + c’ = .0500, 95% bootstrap CI [.0172 to .0828]) were supported.

**References**

*References available upon request.*