

**A Pilot Study for The Effectiveness of a Forgiveness Discussion Program Among  
College-Age Couples**

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## Signature Page

I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science in Psychology.

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Dr. Fred Volk (Thesis Reader)

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### Abstract

A forgiveness discussion guide- a self-guided intervention for affective, behavioral, and cognitive forgiveness- is a tool with preliminary evidence showing its robust effects on prosocial orientation. Here, using an 8-week forgiveness discussion intervention for college-age couples at a Christian university, this study demonstrates statistically insignificant yet meaningful attenuations in levels of forgiveness and compassionate love. Eight heterosexual couples from the Liberty University undergraduate population consented to be randomly placed in a no-contact control group or experimental group. Before random assignment, the couples completed a pretest measurement consisting of demographic questions, The Enright Forgiveness Inventory, Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale, The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, PROMIS Depression, PROMIS Anxiety, PROMIS Anger, PROMIS Anxiety, PROMIS Fatigue, and PROMIS Sleep. The participants were then randomly assigned to the control group, who waited without contact for 8-weeks, and the experimental group, who completed the guide each week for eight weeks. At the end of eight weeks, the same measures were administered, and data were analyzed. There were no statistically significant mean differences between the guide and control groups. However, there were mean increases in forgiveness and compassionate love concurrent with the research hypothesis. The means did not increase or decrease significantly in the predicted direction for self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, fatigue, and sleep quality.

*Keywords:* forgiveness, compassionate love for humanity, intervention, college-students

## **A Pilot Study for The Effectiveness of a Forgiveness Discussion Program Among College-Age Couples**

Forgiveness has a deep and rich history in the disciplines of religion and philosophy. These foundations led to limited scientific investigation on forgiveness (Enright & North, 1998). However, in recent years, several forgiveness intervention models have been created and tested with various populations, garnering empirical support for forgiveness programs' efficacy on both psychological and physical outcomes (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Lee & Enright, 2019; Wade et al., 2014). In this study, I attempted to expand the literature by examining the efficacy of a forgiveness discussion program among college-aged Christian couples in a dating relationship. In the current literature, the modality of forgiveness programs examined included individual, couple, family, and group intervention sessions led by mental health professionals (see for a meta-analysis Wade et al., 2014), teacher-led and parent-led education-focused programs (Enright et al., 2007; Magnuson et al., 2009), self-led bibliotherapy sessions (Zhao et al., 2017), and forgiveness campaigns to change the climate of a community (Griffin et al., 2019). However, no study tested the efficacy of a forgiveness discussion program in the published literature to this author's knowledge.

### **Purpose of the Study**

I hypothesized that participants would show improvements in forgiveness and other relevant health outcomes at the end of our religiously accommodated forgiveness discussion program. Through this intervention, my goal was to continue adding to the understanding of forgiveness and moral virtues' maturation. Specifically, this study's purpose was to understand the efficacy of forgiveness-based interventions on the practice

of forgiveness as a moral virtue and the development of compassionate love for humanity. Virtue development is closely related to moral goodness, benefice, and compassionate love in Christian interventions. Congruent with current literature, this study attempted to investigate past hurt's resolution and the potential benefits to wellbeing (Lawler et al., 2005; Lawler et al., 2003; Webb & Brewer 2010; Wilson et al., 2008).

## **Literature Review**

### **Forgiveness Defined**

The definition of forgiveness is controversial in philosophical and psychological circles due to the complex interaction between the change within the individual and their dynamic situations. In general, measures operationalizing forgiveness fall into two categories: dispositional and situational. Dispositional forgiveness is best understood in terms of an innate quality possessed by the person with a tendency to forgive independent of the situation. Situational forgiveness is best understood as forgiveness that occurs in the context of a specific hurt. Definitions of forgiveness differ within the scholarly community, and some argue forgiveness is a prosocial change, a redirection of motivation, or a virtue (Kim & Enright, 2016; McCullough et al., 2000; Worthington, 2005). However, the most measurable and encompassing definition includes changes in behavior, affect, and cognition toward the offender based on the idea that forgiveness is a virtue involving the person's growth in these areas (Subkoviak et al., 1995). Enright et al. (1998) state that the basic assumption of the process model of forgiveness is that forgiveness as a virtue is a virtuous response to an injustice. Thus, to consider forgiveness, an injustice must occur, accompanied by affective responses encapsulating

anger, resentment, and rumination and the development of virtuous responses such as kindness, generosity, and even moral love.

Initially, hurt serves as an impetus for forgiveness process initiation (Enright et al., 1991). Fundamentally, forgiveness acknowledges that an offense is unfair and will always be unjust while also understanding the person wronged has a moral right to anger (Enright, 2001). This understanding leads to the increased motivation for a cognitive decision to give up this anger and resentment even though the victim has a right to these emotions (Enright, 2001; Enright et al., 1991). The forgiver does not stop at abandoning anger but develops a merciful response to the offender despite the offender's wrongs (Enright, 2001). This step encapsulates compassion as an act of mercy and an altruistic expression of love, specifically, other-focused love such as compassionate love or agape love (Kim et al., 2020a). It is important to note that forgiveness is not excusing or reconciliation; instead, it follows the pattern listed above that allows a full acknowledgment of the wrongdoing and the offended person's right to anger.

### ***Forgiveness as a Moral Virtue***

The conceptual definition of forgiveness as a moral virtue does not fall into dispositional or situation-specific forgiveness; instead, in many ways, it is both. Throughout life, hurt or injustice is inevitable. The response to these injustices or wrongdoings is forgiveness, and an individual must undergo the forgiveness process many times throughout life if they wish to forgive. The continual instances of forgiveness processing facilitate the maturity of forgiveness as a moral virtue. Simply, through the practice of forgiveness in different situations, the individual builds the skill of forgiveness, leading to the belief that they are a forgiving person. Forgiveness as a moral

virtue fits the description denoted above and is supported by Kim and Enright (2016) in their seminal work on the differentiation between dispositional and transgression-specific forgiveness. Kim and Enright (2016) argue that forgiveness fits the construct of moral virtue because one must consciously choose to forgive, practice forgiveness, foster a love of forgiveness, and experience a shift in behavior towards goodness because of forgiveness. Thus, meeting the requirements for a moral virtue established by Aristotle and discussed by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015). Instead of individuals possessing the trait of forgiveness, highly developed forgivers are more consistent over time, circumstances, and people by possessing more than the trait of forgiveness, moving towards virtue maturity. This virtue's development should not be decoupled from the specific situations in which transgression and forgiveness occur. An individual must act upon this moral virtue in the context of an injustice to be considered forgiving. The continual practice and maturity lend the definition to exist outside of the state and trait dichotomy to a developmental trajectory.

A common pitfall in the study of forgiveness is the development of pseudo-forgiveness, a form of disingenuous forgiveness. Pseudo-forgiveness occurs when an individual truly believes that they have forgiven their offender but in actuality are using defense or coping mechanisms to avoid the hurt's confrontation (Enright et al., 1991). Pseudo-forgiveness can be expressed through reaction formation, denial, and projection (Enright et al., 1991). Through these defense mechanisms, the individual can postpone the confrontation of hurt and fail to grow in the virtue of forgiveness. In addition to the denial of hurt, forgiveness is not pardoning, condoning, excusing, or forgetting (Enright & Coyle, 1998). In one way or another, these actions negate the process of forgiveness

and limit the degree to which a person can developmentally mature through the conscious practice of forgiveness.

### **Compassionate Love as a Predictor of Forgiveness**

Others-focused love or agape love is emerging as an important component in the motivation of forgiveness (Kim et al., 2020a). Agape love is essential for humanity and corresponds to the forgiveness step of subverting one's anger to better the relationship and society. Others-focused love may seem counter-intuitive for the process of forgiveness because individuals are typically focused on positive outcomes associated with the self. However, according to the virtue development perspective, emotional variations such as negative affect, emotional neutrality, compassion, altruism, and agape love develop with the practice of forgiveness as a moral virtue (Kim et al., 2020a).

The foundation of compassionate love, like forgiveness, can be traced back to religious practices and teachings. The research community has overlooked the study of forgiveness even though it is a salient factor in many altruistic behaviors (Oman, 2011; Underwood, 2002). Compassionate love is an altruistic, caring love that involves giving oneself for the other's good (Fehr, 2010; Oman, 2011; Underwood, 2002). Compassionate love may be expressed through actions or words, but the essence of compassionate love is the discernments and choices that an individual freely gives (Underwood, 2002; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

Value for the person on a fundamental level is essential. The individual is open and receptive to the most accurate understanding of the person they are bestowing compassionate love upon (Fehr, 2010; Underwood, 2002). Compassionate love is a response of the heart, meaning it is an emotional understanding of the other person (Fehr

& Sprecher 2014; Underwood, 2002). Emotional understanding of the individual and the intrinsic value placed on the individual creates an intense experience that can result in positive affect, increased self-esteem, self-awareness, and a feeling of closeness to others (Fehr, 2010; Sprecher & Fehr, 2006). In addition to benefiting the individual receiving compassionate love, possessing compassionate love for humanity is beneficial in parenting, spouse caregiving, and leadership (Hill, 2002; Miller et al., 2015; Monin et al., 2014; Oman et al., 2010; van Dierendonck, 2015). Researchers propose that compassionate love is associated with such positive and prosocial behaviors due to this construct's sacrificial nature. The subverting of anger and giving of underserved mercy is a critical component of forgiveness and compassionate love. In recent literature, compassionate love predicted dispositional forgiveness above and beyond other prosocial predictors, such as empathy (Kim et al., 2020b).

Compassionate love and forgiveness are closely related. They involve the desire to display agape love or what is good and display this love through behavior, cognition, and affect (Kim et al., 2020a; Kim et al., 2020b). However, compassionate love is a general construct that is not limited to one individual or situation but is general. While ultimately, the development of agape love is closely tied to forgiveness (due to its focus on the suffering of the one extending love), compassionate love is a promising variable to measure through the forgiveness process (Kim et al., 2020a). In sum, agape love will likely correspond with the mature forgiver, where compassionate love will likely covary with forgiveness's burgeoning development as a moral virtue.

### **Mental Health**

Forgiveness entails the development of agape, compassionate, and altruistic love and subversion of negative affect. After continually practicing forgiveness and developing compassionate love, evidence supports an increase in hope. Park et al. (2004) state a natural result of forgiveness is expecting the best for the future and believing a good future is achievable. A hope-focused intervention is effective in self-reported forgiveness levels (Ripley & Worthington, 2002). Hope and forgiveness have a dynamic relationship displayed by increased forgiveness levels, predicting higher levels of hope (Freedman & Enright, 1996). Forgiveness and hope are considered together, and in a recent study, both constructs predicted self-compassion above any other virtue (Booker & Perlin, 2020). If forgiveness increases hope, one can reason forgiveness may decrease levels of depression due to the hopelessness that often characterizes depression symptomology. Forgiveness is positively related to hope, and using depression models, the forgiveness of others attenuated levels of depression (Toussaint et al., 2008; Ripley & Worthington, 2002). The converse relationship between forgiveness and depression is consistent throughout literature, and forgiveness interventions often result in reduced levels of depression (Chung, 2016; Hirsch et al., 2011; Reed & Enright, 2006; Tse & Yip, 2009). In addition to levels of depression, forgiveness may attenuate levels of anxiety. This idea is supported through converging evidence from both intervention studies and cross-sectional research (Lee et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2020a; Kim et al., 2020b).

Mental health and wellbeing are paramount in forgiveness research as interventions often target negative emotional states to improve life quality. An essential result of many forgiveness interventions is self-esteem. In the context of past hurt, individuals can often view themselves as victims, leading to a distorted view of the self

(Kang et al., 2009). Forgiveness aids in the restoration of self-esteem and allows those who are wronged to see themselves as worthy of being loved (Cardi, 2007; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Researchers found a low state of self-esteem is associated with a reduced likelihood of forgiving (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2015; Turnage et al., 2012). In general, research has supports individuals with high self-esteem will be more likely to forgive others' faults and report higher subjective well-being (Ohtsubo et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2017). In many forgiveness interventions, self-esteem not only increases but is sustained and continues to increase after the intervention concluded. This increase in self-esteem demonstrates those with high self-esteem are more likely to forgive, and the process of forgiveness can result in elevated levels of self-esteem (Diblasio & Benda, 2002; Reed & Enright, 2006; Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2015; Yao et al., 2017).

### ***Allostatic Load and Physiological Correlates of Forgiveness***

Increased anxiety, stress, and depression resulting from interpersonal conflict often converge and contribute to allostatic load. Allostatic load is the cumulative effect of daily life experiences that involve ordinary events and major life events (Guidi et al., 2021). When these environmental challenges exceed the ability to cope, one experiences adverse effects such as fatigue and decreased sleep quality. When a specific hurt is resolved, chronic blaming, anger, hostility, and allostatic loads are reduced (Lawler et al., 2005; Lawler et al., 2003). Lawler et al. (2005) also found that state forgiveness was associated with self-care practices such as taking medications as directed. Webb and Brewer (2010) found that those with higher forgiveness levels displayed higher levels of healthy behaviors in a sample of college students. In general, people who have higher

forgiveness levels report higher perceived levels of physical health (Wilson et al., 2008). Forgiveness regarding specific wrongdoings is more strongly associated with positive health outcomes when compared to trait forgiveness. Lawler et al. (2005) found that self-reported sleep quality and fatigue were positively associated with state or dispositional forgiveness. These findings indicate that state forgiveness is strongly related to positive health outcomes, including fatigue and sleep quality (Lawler et al., 2005; Toussaint et al., 2020). Positive wellbeing and reduction of stress may not be directly linked to forgiveness in the causal sequence. Still, they may be mediated by transformations of self-perception and the fostering of positive character virtues (Green et al., 2012).

### ***College Students and Mental Health***

Mental health and wellbeing are salient issues in many populations. College students specifically are at a critical intersection of development and need for access to innovative mental health services in college students. In a sample of college students, researchers found that interpersonal stress predicted more depression, anxiety, somatization and less active coping strategies (Coiro et al., 2017).

Due to the sensitive period of college development, intervening to remediate past hurt is essential and could prove very beneficial (Coiro et al., 2017). In addition to emerging adulthood being a critical period, college students are a willing resource for most researchers to utilize. A forgiveness intervention targeting college-aged adults is both doable and worth doing. In the table below (Table 1), mental health incidents are recorded via what college students experienced in the past 12 months (American College of Health Association, 2018).

### **Table 1**

*Percentage of Students Impacted by Adverse Mental Health*

Students reported the following within the last 12 months:	Male	Female	Total
Felt that things were hopeless	46%	57.8%	55%
Felt overwhelmed by all you had to do	78.5%	91.9%	88.1 %
Felt exhausted (not from physical activity)	75.3%	88.2%	84.6%
Felt very lonely	56.3%	67.1%	64.4%
Felt very sad	59.0%	73.8%	69.9%
Felt so depressed it was difficult to function	34.8%	45.1%	42.9%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	49.1%	69.8%	64.3%
Felt overwhelming anger	37.4%	45.1%	43.3%
Seriously considered suicide	11.3%	12.8%	13%
Attempted suicide	1.8%	1.7%	1.9%
Intentionally cut, burned, or otherwise injured yourself	5.2%	9.2%	8.5%

This intervention target for college students can remediate these mental health concerns by helping them develop coping skills. Through the development of compassionate love, empathy, and a forgiveness-based mindset, students can develop resilience. While no data exists on the population target mental health status of college students at Liberty University, researchers can glean possible mental health information from resources provided by student counseling services. According to the Liberty Student Counselling services website, students may access self-help guides for anxiety, ADHD, depression, disordered eating, pornography addiction, and sexual assault awareness (Liberty University, 2021).

**Intervention Modalities**

Forgiveness interventions provide a unique opportunity to understand the effectiveness of forgiveness and help individuals through past hurt. Historically, there are

three primary categories of forgiveness interventions: decision-based, process-based group, and process-based individual interventions (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The first model by Enright and the Human Development Study Group consists of a 20-point process encompassing four phases: Uncovering, Decision, Work, and Deepening (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991). McCullough and Worthington (1997) propose an hour-long session in which the client processes through hurt, grief, then finally, the decision to forgive. In their meta-analysis, Baskin and Enright (2004) found that decision groups were significantly less effective between all forms of intervention than process models of forgiveness.

Additionally, there were significantly higher scores for the longer individual counseling process-based interventions due to the time and effort dedicated to deeper processing (Baskin & Enright, 2004). Process-based forgiveness interventions contain four main components: recalling the offense, empathizing with the offender, committing to forgiveness, and overcoming feelings of unforgiveness (Wade et al., 2014). Currently, there is not a significant foundation of literature supporting cognitive decision-based forgiveness; this may be due to the nature of forgiveness as a virtue that can be developed and fostered over time (Kim & Enright, 2016). Forgiveness is a moral virtue synonymous with the process-based theory of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a static trait measured at consistent levels throughout life but can be captured regarding specific wrongdoing in the individual's place in the forgiveness process. This process may not be linear and is subject to change within the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship dynamic. Within the process of forgiveness, people find healing, increased psychological wellbeing, and decreased health risks (Baskin & Enright 2004). For some, access to an in-depth process-

based counseling forgiveness intervention may not be feasible, and, to our knowledge, there is no independent process-based forgiveness education intervention.

### *Bibliotherapy and Discussion Interventions*

In previous literature, using a forgiveness bibliotherapy guide adhering to the tenants of process-based interventions was an effective tool in increasing forgiveness levels (Graham et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy, while well established, has received little attention for the treatment of trauma, anxiety, depression, and virtue building. For the development of compassionate love, which is a predictor of a plethora of positive mental health outcomes and forgiveness, very few therapists or individuals specialize in therapy focused on these constructs. Bibliotherapy provides a scaffolded yet flexible intervention that can be delivered anywhere in the world to anyone given the materials (Gualano et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy is also a non-stigmatizing intervention that can alleviate stress, depression, and anxiety while making patients feel more at ease with their condition or symptom cluster. In adults, bibliotherapy showed long-term effects with immediate delivery, adding to the intervention's convenience and efficacy (Gualano et al., 2017).

However, for populations where reading and reflecting on long passages is not possible or extraneous to their current lifestyles, such as children, adolescents, or college students, a less structured approach may be necessary. For example, in a population of parents and children, a discussion or education intervention was utilized to assess the increase in the parent's forgiveness levels (Noakes et al., n.d.). For those in the discussion condition, the parents engaged with the child in a simple conversation on forgiveness. In the education condition, the parents taught their children about forgiveness using a guide

(Noakes et al., n.d.). In this case, a structured educational guide was as effective as a discussion-based intervention for children and parents (Noakes et al., n.d.). Noakes et al. (n.d.) found that when parents were asked to have an educational discussion with their children about forgiveness versus a casual discussion on forgiveness, both interventions effectively increased forgiveness levels in parents. This finding, coupled with evidence from bibliotherapy, indicates that a discussion guide based on forgiveness education may prove effective in the facilitation of the forgiveness process. Additionally, utilizing the positive benefits of a bibliotherapy intervention such as flexibility, anonymity, and affordability with the reduced rigor provided through discussions of forgiveness and open-ended questions, can provide a new forgiveness intervention method.

### **Forgiveness Interventions in Religious Populations**

Specifically, within religious populations, there are typically higher forgiveness levels (McCullough et al., 2000). Religiously and spiritually motivated forgiveness is associated with greater psychological wellbeing and lower risk of mental health distress (Chen et al., 2019). In a meta-analysis, researchers found that the victim's feelings towards their relationship with God and the offense's spiritual aspect were significantly related to forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013). Unlike any intervention completed in current literature, this intervention appeals to the personal, global, and eternal or cosmic practices of developing forgiveness.

In general, there are three approaches to developing a forgiving mind, as identified by Enright (2015). First, as an individual experiencing hurt, Enright (2015) proposes thinking about the offender throughout their development, as an innocent infant with inherent worth and potential, a malleable child at the will of their environment, an

adolescent finding their identity, a young adult learning to be in relationships, a middle-aged adult struggling through stress, and an older adult experiencing the ramifications of their actions. Through this reflection, developing empathy for what may have influenced the offender is paramount and facilitates compassionate love toward the offender (Enright, 2015). Second, one can continue to develop a forgiving mind through establishing common humanity or common personhood by placing the offender in a global context. Simply put, the offender is identified as a person who needs shelter, sustenance and will eventually die, in the same way as the offended. Developing a forgiving mind in this context means seeing forgiveness as a prosocial choice that reflects shared humanity (Enright, 2015).

Both the personal and global perspectives on developing a forgiving mind are reflected in both decision and process-based forgiveness interventions and have received general support and demonstrate efficacy (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The eternal perspective on developing a forgiving mind is not always seen in interventions other than the Enright model. Eternal or cosmic forgiveness is practiced when an individual realizes something inherently eternal about the human connection (Enright, 2015). When the injured party acknowledges their hurt in a larger construct of eternal existence, the hurt's significance is not minimized but understood in the context of a soul's eternal qualities. Within the eternal perspective of forgiveness lies integration with religion and faith-based teachings. Specifically, within the context of Judeo-Christian beliefs, the Bible teaches the soul lives forever (English Standard Version, 2001/2010, Psalm 22:26, 23:6, 49:7-9; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Daniel 12:2-3; Matthew 25:46; & 1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Due to the

eternal nature of the soul, Christians are asked to forgive because God has provided forgiveness through his Son (English Standard Version, 2001/2010, Colossians 3:13).

Eternal or cosmic forgiveness is a core tenant of others-focused love required of Christian because of the commandment to see oneself and others in the image of God (English Standard Version, 2001/2010, 1 Corinthians 15:49). In this case, individuals are called to see their offender as God's creation and therefore carry inherent worth. Eternal forgiveness calls on the person to stand in pain, as Jesus did, and be heroic in their forgiveness as a moral virtue (English Standard Version, 2001/2010, Romans 5:8). Thus, within the context of Christian faith, a forgiveness intervention focused on others-focused love, grounded in the core beliefs and commands, has the potential to develop an eternally forgiving mind and strong moral virtue in a Christian population.

### **Current Study**

The current study aimed to address the need for wellbeing interventions in Christian college students and bolster the findings related to forgiveness interventions and the development of forgiveness as a moral virtue. A discussion-based modality has the potential to provide a unique, affordable, and flexible intervention. The utilization of a discussion program would also help discern the need for an interventionist or a more structured guide with forgiveness intervention literature. Due to the flexibility, if efficacious, this program can generalize to other populations in need of intervention unable to access other mental health and wellbeing interventions. For a Christian population, the religiously integrated discussion guide can provide a higher level of understanding and growth, leading to the multiplication of the positive benefits associated with the development of forgiveness as a moral virtue.

For college students developing autonomy, coping with stress, and healing from past hurt, an intervention fostering a lifelong developmental trajectory has the potential to serve as a protective factor. Additionally, college students tend to have limited time to dedicate to personal development while in competitive programs and extracurricular activities. The use of a flexible discussion-based intervention will remove a barrier to care and facilitate positive wellbeing. For a Christian College population, the students identified as participants were required to talk with their partner about past hurt and the current process of forgiveness. Their hurt identified during the study's initiation did not have to occur within the current relationship, but any hurt individuals may have experienced or are currently experiencing. Congruent with previous literature, I hypothesized the use of an 8-week guide would facilitate increases in levels of forgiveness and other positive wellbeing outcomes such as compassionate love, hope, and self-esteem. Through these tenants' development, the individual will be better prepared to cope with depression and anxiety. Additionally, the restoration of self-esteem and letting go of the past may facilitate higher self-care levels, leading to decreased fatigue and increased sleep quality.

My first goal through this project is to test the prediction that a religiously integrated forgiveness discussion guide will increase situation-specific forgiveness. Specifically, I hypothesized that participants in the experimental condition would show more significant improvements in their level of transgression-specific forgiveness than a no-contact control group at the post-test. This increase in the situation or transgression-specific forgiveness will serve as an impetus for growth in compassionate love for humanity and self-esteem compared to a no-contact control group.

Similarly, along with an increase in positively valenced virtues and attributes, there will be a decrease in the negatively valenced attributes of depression, anxiety, and anger in the experimental condition compared to the control group. The reduction of depression, anxiety, and anger may catalyze change in overall wellbeing. Specifically, a reduction in allostatic load is evidenced by increased sleep quality and decreased fatigue in the experimental condition compared to those in the control condition.

### *Hypothesis*

Hypothesis 1: Participants in the experimental condition will show greater improvements in their level of transgression-specific forgiveness toward one offender compared to a no-contact control group at the post-test.

Hypothesis 2: Guide utilization will lead to an increase in levels of compassionate love for humanity and self-esteem when compared to a no-contact control group.

Hypothesis 3: Depression, anxiety, and anger will decrease in the experimental condition compared to the control group.

Hypothesis 4: Fatigue levels in the experimental condition will decrease in relation to those in the control condition.

Hypothesis 5: Sleep disturbance levels will decrease for those in the experimental condition compared to those in the control condition.

### **Method**

To be included as a participant in this study, candidates must be over 18 and be in a serious heterosexual romantic relationship. Also, both romantic partners must take part in the research as a dyad. At least one individual of the couple had to be enrolled as an undergraduate student at the university. In limiting variability, this study excluded those

in married or same-sex relationships; however, these demographics should be addressed in future research. The rationale for this sample is as follows: college-aged individuals are at risk for higher stress, depression, and adverse outcomes due to interpersonal and systemic hurt; using the unit of couples encourages accountability and discussion around the topic of forgiveness.

### **Demographic Information**

After obtaining IRB approval, I recruited a total sample of 18 heterosexual romantic couples from a conservative Christian College on the East Coast consisting of both residential and online students (male  $n = 18$ ; female  $n = 18$ ). However, through the intervention during a global pandemic, ten couples were unable to complete the protocol, leaving eight couples with completed pre-and post-intervention data (male = 8; female = 8;  $Mage = 23.5$ ). For a participant flow diagram, see Appendix II. The sample primarily consisted of individuals identifying themselves as White ( $N=9$ ), followed by Black or African American ( $N=3$ ), Asian ( $N=3$ ), and Other ( $N=1$ ). Inclusion criteria mandated at least one individual in the relationship must be a current college student ( $N=14$ ) with all other participants stating they were not college students ( $N=2$ ). Since the instituted intervention is religiously integrated, an important demographic variable was participants' religious background, but we did not require that the romantic partner's religion was also Christian. The population primarily identified themselves as Christian ( $N = 13$ ), Jain ( $N=1$ ), Agnostic ( $N = 1$ ), and None ( $N=1$ ).

### **Intervention Protocol**

Participants were recruited for participation through in-class presentations, social media posts, and school-wide emails. Possible participants were prompted to contact the

primary author via email. After the initial email request, all individuals were given an informed consent form. Both individuals in the relationship were required to sign, date, and return a digital or physical signed copy to the primary investigator. To participate in the research the individuals were screened to make sure they were in a dating relationship.

Individuals who completed the initial pretest were randomly assigned to an intervention group where they received the discussion guide or were placed into a no-contact control group. After the couples were randomly assigned to either group, the control group was not contacted for eight weeks. For more specifics on the flow of participants, please see Appendix II. Through Qualtrics, a pretest survey was administered at the beginning of the eight-week program. For the experimental group, they received compliance questions once a week to assess adherence to the guide. The average completion rate of the weekly forgiveness guide was 7.25 weeks out of 8 weeks. The intervention group was contacted on the Friday of each week with a compliance questionnaire to affirm the completion of each week's guide. The questions consisted of four multiple-choice declarative questions that contained no personal information. After 8-weeks, the no-contact control group and the intervention group received the post-test survey. One month after the post-test survey, the intervention group received the same survey to establish the intervention's prolonged effects. After the completion of the follow-up, the control group received the intervention guide for their use.

### **Guide Utilization**

I employed a religiously integrated forgiveness discussion guide written by Kim (see Appendix III) for participants to self-administer over eight weeks. In order to reach

differing levels of forgiveness and create a prosocial change in participants, a discussion guide was created to follow the empirically validated Enright model of the forgiveness process (see Table 2) (Enright, 2001). This guide is integrated with Biblical tenants to facilitate the development of cosmic mindset of forgiveness.

**Table 2**

*Empirical Structure of Guide Following the Enright Forgiveness Process*

Week Number	Topic Covered in Guide	Enright Process
1	What Is Forgiveness?	
2	Who Hurt You and How Have You Been Dealing with the Hurt?	Uncovering Your Anger
3	Why Forgive?	Uncovering Your Anger
4	Who Is My Offender?	Uncovering Your Anger and Deciding to Forgive
5	Compassion Towards the Offender	Deciding to Forgive and Working on Forgiveness
6	Love Towards My Offender	Working on Forgiveness
7	Finding Meaning in Suffering	Discovery and Release from Emotional Prison
8	The Art of Enduring	Discovery and Release from Emotional Prison

Each participant in the experimental condition was given a guide that included biblical passages, reflection questions, and discussion questions to assist the couple in the process of forgiveness. The researcher sent weekly emails to all participants with compliance questions, reminders on using the guide, and encouragement to ask questions. The discussion intervention approach was utilized due to the intervention's independent

nature and the possibility of completing this intervention during a time of physical separation or distance between the couple. The 8-week Forgiveness Meeting Guide for Christians follows the process-based forgiveness model tenants where the individual processes through uncovering anger, deciding to forgive, working on forgiveness, and the discovery and release emotional prison. See Appendix III for the complete guide.

## **Measures**

### ***Transgression-Specific Forgiveness***

The Enright Forgiveness Inventory was used to assess state/transgression-specific forgiveness (EFI; Subkoviak et al., 1995). The EFI assesses the positive and negative affect, behavior, and cognition towards the offender due to a specific offense. Total scores range from 30 to 180, where the higher scores indicate the higher levels of forgiveness for one specific offender identified by participants. Participants respond to Likert-type questions and qualitative questions consisting of examining degrees of forgiveness towards a specific person, such as “How deeply were you hurt when the incident occurred?” For this study, Cronbach’s alpha is .975.

### ***Compassionate Love***

The Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale was used to assess the individual’s compassionate love towards humanity or strangers (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Compassionate love for humanity is defined as an attitude toward humanity that involved behavior, feeling, and thinking that focuses on the concern, caring, and support of humanity and a motivation to understand and help humanity when they are in need (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; Sprecher & Fehr, 2006). This scale consists of 21 items asking participants questions regarding their attitudes towards strangers or humanity. Scores

range from 21 to 147, with higher scores indicating a higher degree of compassionate love towards humanity. Participants are asked to answer each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 7 (true of me). Questions include “I often have tender feelings toward people (strangers) when they seem to be in need” and “I very much wish to be kind and good to fellow human beings” (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Previous research reports a Cronbach’s alpha of .95 (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), while in this specific population, the internal consistency reliability is very high ( $\alpha = .969$ ).

### ***Self-Esteem***

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a ten-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring negative and positive feelings about the self. Originally, the measure was created to assess high schooler’s levels of self-esteem. However, since its creation, the scale has been used by a variety of groups. The reliability of this scale varies between .85 and .88, indicating stability (Rosenberg, 1979). Participants respond to questions such as “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure” on a four-point Likert-Style scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Higher scores indicate a higher level of self-esteem, and scores can range from 10 to 40. For this study, the Cronbach’s alpha is .957 indicating high internal reliability.

### ***Emotional Distress***

Depression, anxiety, and anger measures were used in conjunction to measure emotional distress (Cella et al., 2010). The PROMIS Emotional Distress- Depression Short Form consists of 8 items designed to assess depression levels over the last seven

days. The PROMIS Emotional Distress- Anxiety scale contains seven items assessing anxiety levels for the past seven days. The PROMIS Emotional Distress-Anger Short Form was developed to assess anger in the last seven days using five items. Respondents were asked to indicate how they felt regarding certain emotional statements such as “I felt worthless,” “I felt fearful,” and “I was irritated more than people knew” on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The participants are asked to respond regarding the frequency of these feelings on a scale of “never” to “always.” The range of possible score responses for depression is 8-40, 7-35 for anxiety, and 5-25 for anger. High scores indicate higher degrees of depression, anxiety, and anger. Reliability for these scales is historically high. Within this sample, reliabilities are consistent with previous research with a Cronbach’s alpha of  $a = .937$  for depression,  $a = .912$  for anxiety,  $a = .923$  for anger.

### ***Physical Health Indicators***

As an exploratory measure, sleep disturbance and fatigue measures were included based on the research found in Cella et al. (2010). The PROMIS Sleep Disturbance Short Form consists of eight items assessing sleep quality in the last seven days, such as “my sleep was refreshing” and “I worried about being able to fall asleep” on a Likert scale from one to five with lower scores indicating lower sleep disturbance and higher scores indicating higher sleep disturbance. Total scores range from 8-40 with internal consistency reliability of  $a=.907$ . The PROMIS Fatigue Short Form was developed to assess fatigue levels over the past seven days. Questions are composed of 8 items on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating high fatigue and lower scores indicating lower degrees of fatigue. Questions in the scale consist of “how run down did

you feel on average?” and “how fatigued were you on average?” Total scores range from 8 to 40 with a Cronbach’s alpha of  $\alpha = .922$ , indicating high internal consistency reliability.

### **Analysis**

Individuals who failed to complete the post-test analysis were excluded from the data analysis. One individual could not complete all post-test measures and was removed from analysis. Due to the limited sample size and exploratory measures, assumptions of normality are assessed through boxplot visual inspection.

Data collected from the intervention were analyzed using independent and paired samples t-tests in SPSS. Data from the participants were coded for anonymity and grouped into dyads based on the couple. Participant data were then grouped into means, and differences were calculated between pretest and post-test measures for each group. These mean differences were then analyzed using an independent sample t-test. Since a mean difference was established, however insignificant, a further probe of the data was conducted through running paired samples t-test for mean increase within the group. Due to the small sample size and insignificance, the data analysis was limited, and no further tests were conducted. Refer to Appendix I for data tables.

### **Results**

In total, 44 individuals or 22 couples signed informed consent forms. However, only 36 individuals completed the initial pretest assessment. After the initial pretest throughout the eight-week intervention or no-contact control period, only sixteen individuals remained in the sample (see Figure 1). Of the sixteen individuals, eight individuals in each group or four couples in the control condition and four couples in the

experimental condition. Recruitment began in January 2020, and the researchers obtained a minimal sample size accounting for possible attrition and the intervention began on May 11, 2020. The intervention took place over the following eight weeks, with the final week survey concluding on the week of July 7, 2020. One month later, the researchers sent a one-month follow-up to the participants but received only two responses to the one-month follow-up. As such, the one-month follow-up was disregarded due to insufficient sample size.

To test whether the guide had a significant impact on the variables selected, differences between pre and post-test means were calculated. The differences between means were then used to run an independent samples t-test comparing the mean differences between the experimental and control group (see Table 4).

Hypothesis one states there would be a significant increase in the total levels of transgression-specific forgiveness between experimental and control groups when change scores are compared. To test hypothesis one, an independent sample t-test of mean change scores revealed no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental condition (see Table 4). A one-tailed analysis was conducted due to the foundational research on the intervention's efficacy and directional hypothesis. Additionally, the effect size for the difference between the control and experimental condition was very small, indicating a lack of intervention effect on this variable. (See Table 4). It is important to note, while the overall test is insignificant, a paired sample t-test for within-group variance shows that there was an overall mean forgiveness increase between pre ( $M = 127.37$ ) and post-test ( $M = 144.125$ ) for the experimental condition.

This indicates that forgiveness in the experimental group did increase through the intervention, but not at a significant level (see Table 5).

Previous research provides sufficient support to endorse an increase in compassionate love for humanity and self-esteem in the experimental condition when compared to the no-contact control. The independent t-test comparison of mean differences revealed no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental mean differences for compassionate love for humanity (see Table 4). However, the effect size for compassionate love ( $d = 1.594$ ) merits further investigation and is an interesting finding. Compassionate love for humanity increased within the guide condition from pretest ( $M = 109.25$ ) to post-test ( $M = 119.75$ ) marginally; however, the difference was not statistically significant. For self-esteem, the independent sample-t test for differences was not significant however, the effect size is large ( $d = .911$ ). In assessing within group variance, the control condition experienced no attenuation in self-esteem levels (see Table 6). However, in the experimental condition, self-esteem decreased from pretest ( $M = 17.125$ ) to posttest ( $M = 16.25$ ). Therefore, hypothesis two was not supported.

Hypothesis three predicted a decrease in depression, anger, and anxiety in the guide condition compared to the no contact control and a decrease in these variables from the pretest in the guide condition. However, an independent t-test of differences between groups revealed no statically significant differences in depression. However, depression did decrease in the experimental condition from pre-test ( $M = 11.38$ ) to post-test ( $M = 10.63$ ). For the experimental condition, anger decreased slightly, but not significantly (see Table 3 & 5) When levels of anger are compared between the guide and control

conditions, an independent t-test of mean differences revealed no statistically significant difference between experimental and control conditions. Significant anxiety mean differences were not observed between experimental and control conditions through an independent sample t-test (see Table 3 and 4). However, the effect size of the mean differences for anxiety was large ( $d = 1.032$ ) and should be further investigated. In the experimental group, there was an increase in anxiety at pretest ( $M = 11.5$ ) and post-test ( $M = 11.875$ ). Thus, hypothesis three was not supported.

My fourth and fifth hypotheses, to decrease allostatic load, thereby decreasing fatigue and decreasing sleep disturbance, were assessed using paired and independent sample t-tests. Fatigue in pre ( $M = 18.25$ ) and post-test ( $M = 20.875$ ) levels indicated an increase, which directly opposed the directional hypothesis of a decrease in fatigue levels when comparing the experimental and control condition (see Tables 5 and 6). The effect size for this analysis was high ( $d = 1.434$ ), indicating an effect influencing fatigue during the intervention. Thus, the fourth hypothesis, regarding a decrease in fatigue, was not supported. Sleep disturbances scores were hypothesized to decrease in the guide condition and decrease over time, observed in the data ( $M_{diff} = .642$ ). However, the mean difference was not statistically significant (see Table 3 and 4). Thus, hypothesis five was not supported.

### **Discussion**

There was no statistically significant difference between those who partook in the guide condition versus those that were participants of the no contact control. However, it is essential to note that there were mean increases in the predicted direction for compassionate love and forgiveness in the experimental group. Anger, anxiety, fatigue,

and self-esteem all were attenuated but were either not changed significantly or did not change in the predicted direction. Sleep disturbance decreased in between groups as hypothesized; however, it was not a statistically significant increase. While these findings are not statistically significant, the mean changes reveal some change in the sample possibly attributable to the guide, warranting further investigations.

While the findings are insignificant overall, it is important to note that for compassionate love ( $d = 1.594$ ), anxiety ( $d = 1.032$ ), sleep ( $d = .907$ ) and fatigue ( $d = 1.434$ ), the independent sample t-test of the difference show a large effect or magnitude of difference between the means. Since this study is the first to employ this intervention to this population, there are no similar studies for comparison to attempt the understanding what may have contributed to these large effect sizes. In a study utilizing a bibliotherapy intervention, pre-test and post-test measures of anxiety were statistically significantly different but the effect size was small (Zhao et al., 2017). To this author's knowledge, there are limited compassionate love experimental studies to contribute the understanding of what effect could occur in the context of this intervention. Both sleep and fatigue studies are limited to cross sectional research and effect sizes are not comparable between different methodologies. However, due to the large attrition rate and decreased homogeneity of variance, these effect sizes cannot be solely attributable to the intervention. Variance and effect could be reduced if replicated in a larger sample with less within group variability.

In comparing these findings with those in published literature, there are obvious differences in significance. In the majority of the self-guided interventions, a robust effect occurs as a result of the intervention. However, this study is the first of its kind in three

distinct ways, (1) the population utilized were college-aged couples, (2) the guide encouraged discussion with a partner rather than providing specific instructions, and (3) the use of a Christian-based intervention.

The population of college-aged students is a population that experiences relatively high levels of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (American College of Health Association, 2018). These adverse mental health issues have been targets of and are alleviated through evidence-based forgiveness interventions (Reed & Enright, 2006; Baskin & Enright, 2004, Freedman & Enright, 1998; Wade et al., 2013). However, unlike in other process-based studies, there was no unifying or set level of hurt established through the screening process in the sample of college students. In decision-based models, a unifying hurt is typically not a requirement for participation in the intervention. However, in many process-based individual and group interventions, a shared hurt is an essential prerequisite (Baskin & Enright, 2004).

Process-based studies typically employ group discussion questions with a guide to facilitate conversation or a one-on-one session to walk through the steps of forgiveness. In the present work, couple discussion was chosen over a weekly facilitated professional discussion on forgiveness. While this study did not require a book assignment as a forgiveness guide, this study utilized a loosely structured discussion guide. However, the effects of self-study or bibliotherapy mirror the current study's novel methodology. Zhao et al. (2017) conducted a bibliotherapy intervention for the workplace to reduce anger and increase workers' wellbeing. In this intervention, the participants were asked to read through a published book on forgiveness each week, answer homework questions, and complete reflection questions. Zhao et al. (2017) observed those using bibliotherapy

experienced significant changes in anxiety, anger, and forgiveness when compared to a relaxation group. Another bibliotherapy forgiveness intervention found, after 8-weeks of structured forgiveness education, mixed results from their intervention (Graham et al., 2012). Graham et al. (2012) found significant differences within groups while there were no significant changes between groups.

However, there are essential differences between the current study, Zhao et al. (2017), and Graham et al. (2012). In the current study, I did not utilize an in-depth bibliotherapy intervention and instead used discussion with partners about past hurt as the impetus for change. Additionally, I emphasized Christian faith and biblical passages to focus on the eternal nature of forgiveness in undergraduate students at a Christian University.

In our sample, the couples were instructed to discuss topics each week through the stages of forgiveness in addition to reading through the content in the guide. The use of forgiveness discussion and forgiveness education interventions led to increases in forgiveness in a population of parents (Noakes et al., n.d.) In Noakes et al. (n.d.), parents who simply talked with their children about forgiveness versus parents who used a forgiveness education guide were similarly effective in increasing parent forgiveness and decreasing child anxiety, child anger, and parent-child conflict (Noakes et al., n.d.). Based on these findings, it can be inferred that loosely structured interventions in the context of relationships would effectively reduce mental distress and increase forgiveness. However, as seen in this intervention, the discussion guide was not effective in loosely structuring forgiveness discussion.

Conversely, in research on couple-based forgiveness intervention, the use of a therapeutically guided intervention is the best practice (DiBlasio, 2010). Initially, the drop in participants due to relationship termination ( $n= 4$ ) suggests an unstable dynamic in which healing from past hurt may occur. Thus, it may be plausible that the findings in Noakes et al. (n.d.) were not replicable in this study due to the lack of unconditional love exemplified by the parent-child dynamic.

Another possible reason for non-significance in the findings is the use of Christian tenants and direct quotes from the Bible to demonstrate forgiveness in a population of differing religions. While the population consists of students and their significant other at a Christian University, only thirteen individuals identified themselves as Christian. There is a strong relationship between religiosity/spirituality and state forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013). However, religiously integrated forgiveness interventions are not always more effective than non-religiously integrated programs (Rye & Pargament, 2002). In the present intervention, using the personal, global, and cosmic levels of forgiveness, the emphasis on religion may have deterred from the intervention's overall impact.

This study's finding of decreased self-esteem in the experimental condition is novel and, to this author's knowledge, has not occurred in any other forgiveness interventions. On the contrary, supporting literature shows an increase in self-esteem resulting from a forgiveness intervention (Baskin & Enright, 2005). However, the mean decrease is minimal and may be attributable to an overall reduction in wellbeing during a pandemic or unequal variance between groups. Alternatively, the decreased state of self-esteem could have served as a preventative factor for forgiveness development (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2014). During the conversations regarding the wrongdoing, the individual's

defensiveness and reluctance to begin the forgiveness process could have interfered with their development of the moral virtue of forgiveness. Additionally, the use of a religious intervention explaining why one should forgive using biblical tenants may have contributed to a negative self-evaluation threatening the forgiveness process (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2014). Future research should continue to investigate the relationship between forgiveness discussion programs and self-esteem.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Due to the drop-out rate, this study contained a small sample size. Studies with small sample sizes are more complicated due to the lack of statistical power and increased risk of Type II error. Power is the probability that the researcher will find a difference between groups that really exist (Warner, 2013). A Type II error is committed when the null hypothesis is not rejected when the null hypothesis is incorrect (Warner, 2013). Simply, one says there is no difference between means where there is a difference between means. The risk of low statistical power and Type II errors increases in studies with a small sample size and presents a significant limitation of this study. For studies with small sample sizes, power and Type II errors are influenced by randomization and unequal groups due to inequality of variance. Thus, the number of individuals in this study limits the internal and external validity and requires a replication for the solidity of results.

The current study utilized the couple as the unit of intervention, requiring interpersonal interactions and discussion each week. The unit of intervention, the couple, contributes a significant source of score interdependence allowing individuals to be influenced by personal and relational dynamics. If the couple's scores are treated as a

unit, the assumption is not violated. However, due to attrition, I was unable to utilize the mean couple score for the unit of analysis and violated the assumption of independent observation. Thus, this analysis was unable to account for the potential variation caused by the couple's interaction and interdependence. In the original data analysis protocol, the mean change of the couple would be the unit of comparison; however, attrition made this analysis impossible.

Another limitation in this study is the utilization of a convenience sample. Those that elected to participate in a forgiveness intervention were likely motivated by an increased need or desire for forgiveness or to work on their relationship. Additionally, the initial contacts for participation were often women, who recruited their male partners for participation. It is possible that the male counterparts were not as willing to participate or discuss. Future research should consider a larger sample while controlling for commitment to the relationship through a relationship satisfaction measure. The future utilization of other populations such as married couples, college roommates, or friends would assist in the generalizability of the intervention and further understanding the effect of a discussion intervention.

This study's initial recruitment and intervention occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and should be considered in the context of this international incident. While there is limited research from the United States on the impact of COVID-19, international studies reveal a significant impact on many of our variables, possibly attributing to our insignificant findings. In an international cross-sectional study conducted in Italy, 57.1% of the population sampled reported poor sleep quality, 31.1% reported high anxiety, 41.8% reported high distress, and 7.8% reported posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

symptomology attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic (Casagrande, 2020). Since the measures used required individuals to report their sleep quality, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and anger from the last seven days as a measure of overall wellbeing, we anticipate the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to substantial stress and decrease in wellbeing despite the potential coping skills provided by the intervention.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth's use grew substantially and demonstrated promise for the effectiveness of self-guided interventions and an increase in positive coping (Madigan et al., 2020). However, there is little evaluation or evidence in current literature demonstrating the effectiveness of these interventions, especially during COVID-19 (Longyear & Kushlev, 2021). Current literature recommends increased oversight and guidance through therapeutic interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Longyear & Kushlev, 2021). The current intervention consisted of self-study and discussion so effectiveness may have been reduced due to the need for more oversight and guidance. Future research should consider the consistency needed for the intervention to be effective and attempt a replication during a time of greater stability.

### **Implications**

While the findings are statistically insignificant, researchers can use this information to further investigate discussion and education-based interventions in addition to the relationship of compassionate love to forgiveness. For those hoping to use forgiveness interventions as a part of therapeutic intervention, research demonstrates the importance of consistency and further guidance through the forgiveness process (Longyear & Kushlev, 2021). Based on previously mixed findings regarding bibliotherapy, a more detailed guide or stronger relationship between those discussing

past hurt should be instituted for the intervention's efficacy (Noakes et al., n.d.; Graham et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2017).

Furthermore, it is important to note that forgiveness and compassionate love for humanity covary through the forgiveness process. These findings show that compassionate love is likely related to the beginning of the forgiveness process. As such, compassionate love for humanity should be considered a salient variable to better understand agape or others-focused love and forgiveness as a moral virtue.

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## Appendix I

**Table 3***Descriptive Statistics for Mean Differences at Pre-test and Post-Test*

Variable	Condition	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>
Total Forgiveness	Experimental	8	-16.750	26.288	9.294
	Control	7	-15.285	28.645	10.827
Affective Forgiveness	Experimental	8	-8.750	14.240	5.034
	Control	7	-8.000	14.456	5.464
Behavioral Forgiveness	Experimental	8	-3.375	5.878	2.078
	Control	7	-4.142	9.771	3.693
Cognitive Forgiveness	Experimental	8	-4.500	7.727	2.732
	Control	7	-3.142	5.928	2.240
Compassionate Love	Experimental	8	-10.500	32.191	11.381
	Control	7	3.000	4.203	1.588
Self-esteem	Experimental	8	.875	3.482	1.231
	Control	7	.571	1.902	.719
Anger	Experimental	8	.125	5.166	1.826
	Control	7	-.142	4.375	1.653
Depression	Experimental	8	.750	4.301	1.520
	Control	7	-2.285	4.715	1.782
Anxiety	Experimental	8	-.375	4.533	1.602
	Control	7	-.285	5.282	1.996
Sleep	Experimental	8	.500	7.111	2.514
	Control	7	-.142	3.804	1.438
Fatigue	Experimental	8	-2.625	6.843	2.419
	Control	7	-.142	4.775	1.805

**Table 4**

*Results of Independent Samples t-tests comparing Pretest and Post-test Measures for the Difference*

Measures	Mean Differences		<i>t</i> (13)	95% CI		<i>p</i> *	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>MD</i>	<i>SED</i>		LL	UL		
Total Forgiveness	-1.464	14.181	-.103	-32.10	29.173	.459	.053
Affective Forgiveness	-.750	7.421	-.101	-16.784	15.284	.460	.052
Behavioral Forgiveness	.767	4.097	.187	-8.083	9.619	.427	.097
Cognitive Forgiveness	-1.357	3.599	-.337	-9.133	6.419	.356	.195
Compassionate Love	-13.5	12.31	-1.096	-40.103	13.103	.146	1.594
Self-Esteem	.303	1.481	.205	-2.898	3.505	.421	.911
Anger	.267	2.493	.107	-5.118	5.654	.458	.960
Depression	3.035	2.327	1.304	-1.992	8.064	.107	.383
Anxiety	-.089	2.432	-.035	-5.56	5.382	.486	1.032
Sleep	.642	3.013	.213	-5.868	7.153	.417	.907
Fatigue	-2.482	3.094	-.802	-9.167	4.202	.218	1.434

\*Denotes the significance value divided by two for a one-tailed test

**Table 5***Results of Paired Samples t-tests comparing Pretest and Post-test Measures for the Experimental Condition*

Experimental Condition	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i> (7)	95% CI		<i>p</i> *	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		LL	UL		
Total Forgiveness	127.37	46.855	144.125	39.018	-1.802	-38.727	5.227	.057	.647
Affective Forgiveness	37.125	17.828	45.875	15.551	-1.738	-20.655	3.155	.063	.614
Behavioral Forgiveness	43.5	16.124	46.875	13.943	-1.624	-8.289	1.539	.074	.581
Cognitive Forgiveness	46.75	13.864	51.25	9.808	-1.647	-10.96	1.96	.072	.582
Compassionate Love	109.25	20.26	119.75	15.257	-.923	-37.412	16.412	.193	.326
Self-Esteem	17.125	7.039	16.25	6.984	.711	-2.036	3.786	.25	.251
Anger	11.25	3.655	11.125	5.668	.068	-4.194	4.444	.473	.024
Depression	11.375	5.153	10.625	5.578	.493	-2.845	4.345	.318	.174
Anxiety	11.5	4.174	11.87	5.54	-.234	-4.165	3.415	.411	.083
Sleep	16	6.59	15.5	6.233	.199	-5.445	6.445	.424	.07
Fatigue	18.25	8.362	20.875	8.475	-1.085	-8.346	3.096	.157	.384

\*Denotes the significance value divided by two for a one-tailed test

**Table 6***Results of Paired Samples t-tests comparing Pretest and Post-test Measures for the Control Condition*

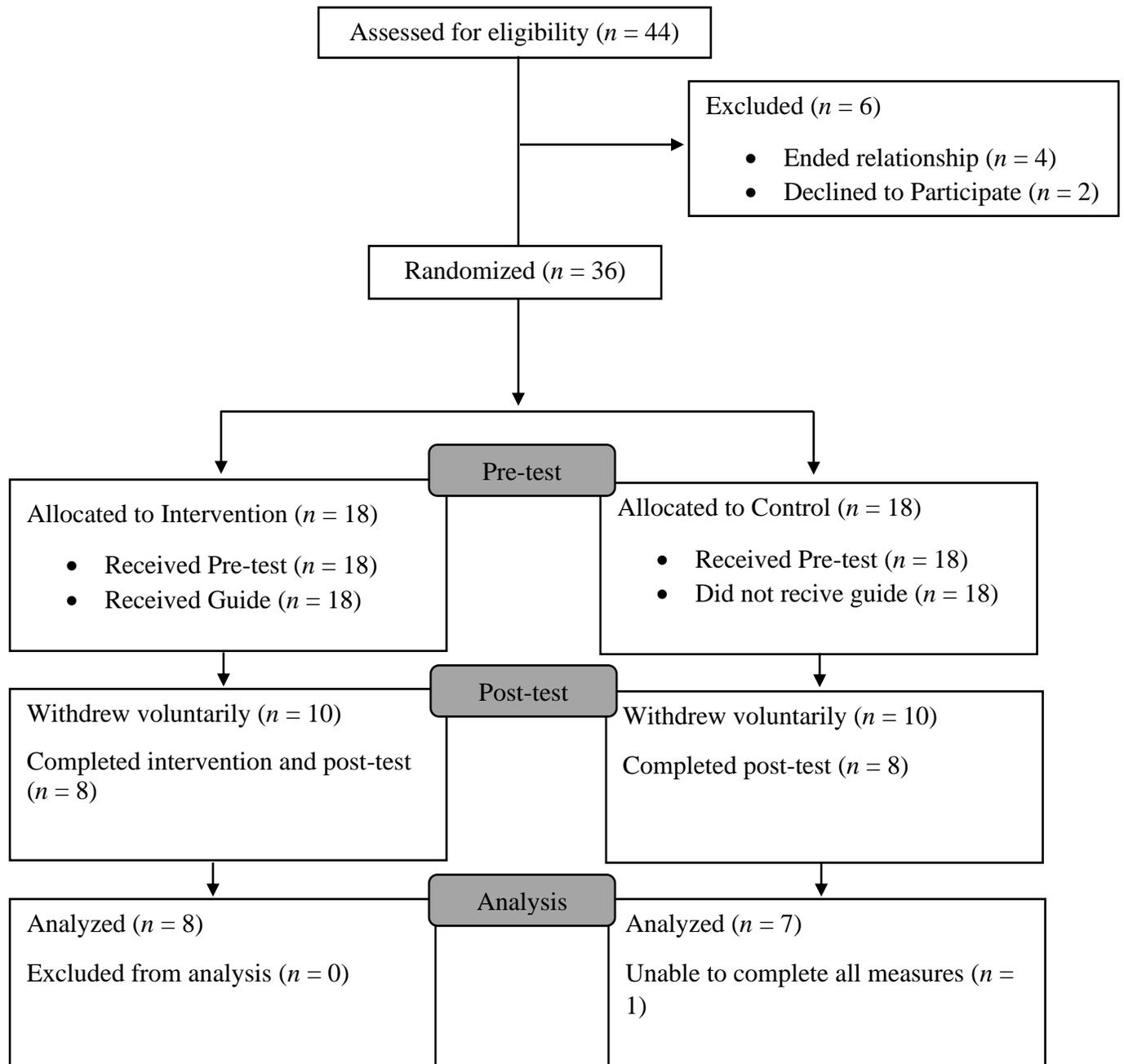
Control Condition Measure	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i> (6)	95% CI		<i>p</i> *	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		LL	UL		
Total Forgiveness	94.428	30.75	109.714	41.847	-1.412	-41.778	11.207	.104	.534
Affective Forgiveness	25.0	7.852	33.0	16.02	-1.464	-21.37	5.37	.097	.553
Behavioral Forgiveness	32.142	12.824	36.285	14.556	-1.122	-13.179	4.893	.105	.424
Cognitive Forgiveness	37.285	11.6	40.428	12.686	-1.403	-8.625	2.339	.378	.530
Compassionate Love	87	25.429	84	26.633	1.888	-.887	6.886	.054	.714
Self-esteem	22.857	6.768	23.285	7.973	.795	-1.187	2.330	.228	.300
Anger	11.857	2.911	12	4.082	-.086	-4.189	3.903	.467	.033
Depression	11.714	4.347	14	4.932	-1.282	-6.647	2.075	.123	.485
Anxiety	12.285	5.056	12.57	4.157	-.143	-5.171	4.599	.445	.054
Sleep	18.574	7.412	18.714	8.179	-.099	-3.661	3.375	.462	.038
Fatigue	18.428	4.859	18.571	6.477	-.079	-4.559	4.271	.469	.030

\*Denotes the significance value divided by two for a one-tailed test

## Appendix II

Figure 1

Sample Flow Diagram



### **Appendix III**

#### **8-Week Forgiveness Meeting Guide for Christians**

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**Note about the author:** Dr. Jichan Kim is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Liberty University. He studied under Dr. Robert Enright, the initiator and pioneer of the scientific study of forgiveness, for his doctoral education. He teaches Psychology and Christianity at Liberty University and is an active researcher on the topic of forgiveness.

**Note about the guide:** This guide is designed for use in small group settings (2-5 participants). Prior to the first week, develop ground rules based on the agreement of everyone for weekly meetings. For these meetings to be successful, it is crucial to put in efforts into developing an atmosphere where each participant feels safe to share his/her feelings and thoughts as freely as possible, but as a general rule, no one should be forced to share more than he/she is willing. Confidentiality between participants should be promised unless immediate professional help is deemed necessary. Also, as a general suggestion, start each meeting with the Word of God and end each meeting with prayers for everyone in the group.

#### **Week 1:**

##### **What is forgiveness?**

“Forgiveness is offering love to a person in the face of injustice and at a time when that person is most unlovable.” ~ Robert D. Enright

- Read the Parable of the Lost Son in [Luke 15:11-32](#) and reflect on the father's forgiveness of his son.
- What did you notice about the father's forgiveness?
- Consider the fact that the father did not withhold his forgiveness until his son's expression of remorse and repentance. Discuss whether or not there can be limits to forgiveness. Do you agree that forgiveness is unconditional? Why or why not?
- How does the father's forgiveness of his son differ from excusing (i.e., what the Lost Son did remains to be unfair no matter what) or reconciliation (i.e., two people restoring a broken relationship in mutual trust)? It is important to note that forgiving is not condoning or excusing. When one condones or excuses, it gives the perception that one was not hurt or that the offender did not mean to hurt. Such actions may reflect poorly on the true meaning of forgiveness, and some may come to believe that forgiving means allowing offense or hurt without any repercussions. Forgiveness, in reality, means admitting the action was wrong and should not be repeated (Enright, 2001).
- Take a moment to think about what it means to forgive. What do you think it means to forgive someone? Please go to the following link and compare the definition provided there with the discussion you had with others:  
<https://internationalforgiveness.com/files/Forgiveness-Defined---Revised.pdf>
- Read [Proverbs 9:10](#) together and pray for wisdom in understanding what forgiveness is and is not.

## Week 2:

**Who hurt you, and how have you been dealing with the hurt?**

“Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.” ~ Corrie Ten Boom

- Please, read [Genesis 37](#). In this passage, Joseph experiences wrongdoing at the hands of his half-brothers. Try to put yourself in Joseph’s shoes and imagine Joseph’s hurt when those who were supposed to care for him threw him into the pit.
- By the nature of what Joseph’s half-brothers did, do you think they deserve Joseph’s forgiveness? Forgiveness is a choice, and no one can force another to forgive. Many people feel morally required to forgive when repentance is offered or because of pressure from their religious beliefs. However, ultimately, it is our choice to forgive and not to forgive. Why do you think Joseph has the right to forgive (or not to forgive) his half-brothers?
- Think about a time when you experienced hurt at the hands of another person. Who was it? When was it? What happened? What was done or said, and how did you respond? Remember, deep hurt is a spectrum that can stem from careless words to physical violence. Share with others about what happened as much as you can.
- Share your current attitude toward the offender. How do you feel toward the person? What do you think of the person? How do you or would you behave toward the person?
- How have you been dealing with the hurt you experienced? Have you avoided your hurt? Have you been in denial of your hurt? Do you think what you have

been doing was effective? Why was it, or was it not effective?

- Read [Romans 12:2](#) together and pray that the Holy Spirit helps you to renew your mind and be transformed into Christ-likeness.

### **Week 3:**

#### **Why forgive?**

“I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Read [Romans 5:8](#) and reflect on Jesus’ death on the Cross.
- Why do you think that Jesus died? For whom did He die? What does it mean that Jesus died for sinners? What impact does His sacrificial love have on your own life?
- Why might forgiveness be a good thing (at least to try)? What changes might you experience if you forgive? Consider changes in your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors as well as your relationship with the Lord and others. Would those changes be worthwhile?
- Perhaps some of your answers to “Why should I forgive?” might be because you desire to remove your resentment, you hope to reconcile with the person who hurt you, you want to grow as a person, you hope to exemplify love to others around you, or you want to obey God’s command to love your enemies. Think about the potential changes in your life that you might be able to enjoy as a result of forgiveness. Are those changes important to you?
- Not all anger is unhealthy; anger can motivate us to contribute to making a just

society. However, untamed anger or toxic anger that controls us can result in aggression, rage, and resentment and can be a vehicle for further evil. For example, anger can be at the root of other undesirable behaviors such as family dysfunction, self-harm, and stress-related illnesses.

- One may try to reduce anger in many different ways; however, forgiveness targets the source of the issue rather than the symptoms. In other words, forgiveness does not make us suppress anger but cures it.
- What are the barriers keeping you from forgiving? Might there be any solutions to overcome those barriers? Share one thing you (because forgiveness is your choice and your choice only) can do this week to get one step closer to the possibility of forgiving your offender.
- Read [Galatians 2:20](#) together and pray so that the Lord allows you to see the beauty of forgiving love that He exemplified on the Cross.

#### **Week 4:**

#### **Who is my offender?**

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.” ~ Dr. Seuss

- Read [Psalm 8](#) and reflect on how wondrous it is that God cares for every one of us.
- Who do you think we are in Christ? Do you think all of us have intrinsic worth? If so, why? Do you see that we did not earn our self-worth? What implications might the unmerited self-worth have on our interactions with others?
- Christians adopt a worldview that gives a framework for the understanding and

respect of others. The Bible discusses the fact that we are created in *imago dei* (the image of God) and, as such, are given intrinsic worth as image-bearers for the creator. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves and view them as persons with thoughts, feelings, histories, and failures, just like us ([Mark 12:31](#)). How might we see our offenders differently if we were to look at them as bearers of the image of God?

- Focus on the fact that your offender is a “person” and try to recollect what you know about him/her as much as possible. Consider his/her childhood, adolescence, adulthood, etc. Also, consider his/her relationships with God and others.
- Share with others what you know about that “person.” As you share, if you feel any changes arising in your heart, share such changes with others as well.
- Try to think of the offender within the broader perspective of personhood (i.e., your offender needs water to drink and food to eat, your offender needs to be loved and needs someone to love, and your offender perhaps has his/her struggles in life), and if you feel any changes arising in your heart, share them with others.
- Read [Genesis 1:26](#) together and pray so that you might be able to see who your offender is as a person with intrinsic worth beyond the context of his/her wrongdoing.

### **Week 5:**

#### **Compassion toward the offender**

“We cannot embrace God's forgiveness if we are so busy clinging to past wounds and nursing old grudges.” ~ T. D. Jakes

- Read [Psalm 116](#) and reflect on the idea that the Lord is full of compassion.
- What do you think compassion means? In what ways is God full of compassion? Have you experienced God's compassion toward you? When was it, how did you feel, and how did it affect you?
- The definition of compassion by Merriam-Webster states that compassion is a “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distresses together with a desire to alleviate it.”
- How about God's compassion? God's compassion surpasses human understanding, so one should return to the Scriptures to find the definition of God's compassion. God's compassion is infinite and eternal; it is renewed every morning ([Lamentations 3:22-23](#)). Jesus Christ exemplified the Father's attributes, including his compassionate nature. When Jesus saw his friends weeping for Lazarus, He felt compassion and wept ([John 11:33-35](#)). Jesus was moved to heal large crowds because of his compassion ([Matthew 14:14](#)).
- Do you think that your offender is worthy of God's compassion? Why or why not? In what ways do you see your offender needs His compassion?
- Is developing compassion toward him/her a possibility for you? If it is challenging to develop compassion toward your offender, that is understandable considering what he/she has done to you. Try to think of your offender as God's image-bearer whom God deeply loves. When you do, are there any changes (even if very small) occurring in your heart?
- Read [Psalm 103:1-4](#) together and pray for your offender so that he/she profoundly knows the Lord and experiences God's love and compassion.

**Week 6:****Love toward my offender**

“Forgiveness is the final form of love.” ~ Reinhold Niebuhr

- Read [1 John 4:7-21](#) and reflect on the idea that God is love Himself.
- What does it mean that God is love? In what way was His love shown to us?  
What does that specific love of God mean to you? What does it mean to live as Christ-followers and to love others as loved?
- God's love is communicated to us in [John 3:16](#): “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” [Romans 5:8](#) proclaims the same message: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We can see from these verses that it is God's greatest desire that we join Him in His eternal home, heaven. He has made the way possible by paying the price for our sins. He loves us because He chose to as an act of His will. Love is an attribute of God, and it is at the core of who He is.
- Try to “feel” His love by reminding yourself of what He did for you. Share your experience of being loved by God.
- Does His love include your offender? Did Jesus die for your offender? Did He bleed for your offender and his/her sins? Would He be pleased if he/she repents and accepts His love?
- Now, considering what Jesus did for you out of love, share with others what might be some of the things that you are willing to do for your offender out of

love.

- Read [1 Peter 4:8](#) together and pray that you might be able to experience Christ's love deeply and intimately and that you can share it with others, including the ones who wronged you.

### **Week 7:**

#### **Finding meaning in suffering**

“The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.” ~ Marianne Williamson

- Read [Genesis 50:15-21](#), and think about the significance of meaning that Joseph has found in his suffering.
- What does it mean when Joseph says he is not in place of God in Verse 19? Why do you think Joseph was able to say what he said?
- Think about what God is trying to teach you through the pain and suffering you experienced due to your offender's wrongdoing. Do you see that He has a good and perfect plan in your suffering for your own sake?
- Joseph literally saved the nation of Israel by his forgiving. Think about the significance of your pain and suffering that you are overcoming through forgiveness in a larger context. Do you see any meaning in your forgiveness beyond your personal life? What might that be? Are you willing to allow your pain and suffering to be used for His greater purpose?
- Read [Romans 8:28](#) together and pray so that you might be able to see the meaning in your suffering as God has intended.

**Week 8:****The art of enduring**

“What is to give light must endure burning” ~ Victor Frankl

- Read [1 Corinthians 13:1-8](#), and reflect on the Biblical meaning of love.
- What does the passage say about the characteristics of love? How does it differ from or similar to your understanding and experience of love? Do you see that love is not just for those who love you back?
- What does it mean when it says love never fails? Do you see that there is a purpose in your struggle to love?
- Paul speaks in Corinthians: “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure” ([1 Corinthians 4:12](#)). This kind of perseverance during persecution comes from the love of God rooted in the heart. Endurance for the sake of endurance is not the point of this teaching. The passage is referring to the kind of endurance motivated by love for God and others. “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God” ([1 Peter 2:20](#)). We must show love irrespective of convenience or ease. A person with God’s type of love will consistently seek what is best for others. Love is not an on-again, off-again proposition, but a commitment to always seek the highest good.
- How do you want to bring glory and honor to God? Can loving the unlovable as best as you can be a way to glorify the Father? In what ways can your forgiving love be lifted up for His glory?
- Striving for a life marked by love is not easy as there will be constant temptations

and spiritual warfare when trying to imitate Christ's love in all areas of life. Do you have any plans in place for the times when you might feel helpless and might want to give up your journey of forgiving? Share some concrete plans with others.

- Read [Deuteronomy 31:6](#) together and pray so that you find a strong will to continue to choose love over hatred no matter what.

You have just begun your journey of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not expected to be easy, and it will take a long time, especially if you are dealing with a deep wound. If you need further guidance, please feel free to contact me ([jjkim5@liberty.edu](mailto:jjkim5@liberty.edu)) and consider the following resources:

#### Websites

- International Forgiveness Institute: <https://internationalforgiveness.com/>
- Dr. Ev Worthington's website: <http://www.evworthington-forgiveness.com/>

Books (The first three are for the general public and the last two are specifically for Christians)

- Forgiveness is a choice: [https://www.amazon.com/Forgiveness-Choice-Step-Step-Resolving/dp/1557987572/ref=sr\\_1\\_sc\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504125&sr=8-1-spell&keywords=forgiveness+is+a+choice](https://www.amazon.com/Forgiveness-Choice-Step-Step-Resolving/dp/1557987572/ref=sr_1_sc_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504125&sr=8-1-spell&keywords=forgiveness+is+a+choice)
- The forgiving life: [https://www.amazon.com/Forgiving-Life-Overcoming-Resentment-Lifetools/dp/1433810913/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504150&sr=8-1&keywords=forgiving+life](https://www.amazon.com/Forgiving-Life-Overcoming-Resentment-Lifetools/dp/1433810913/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504150&sr=8-1&keywords=forgiving+life)
- Eight keys to forgiveness: <https://www.amazon.com/Keys-Forgiveness-Mental->

[Health/dp/0393734056/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504169&sr=8-1&keywords=8+keys+to+forgiveness](https://www.amazon.com/Health/dp/0393734056/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504169&sr=8-1&keywords=8+keys+to+forgiveness)

- Forgiving and reconciling: <https://www.amazon.com/Forgiving-Reconciling-Bridges-Wholeness->

[Hope/dp/0830832440/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504190&sr=8-3&keywords=worthington+forgiveness](https://www.amazon.com/Hope/dp/0830832440/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504190&sr=8-3&keywords=worthington+forgiveness)

A just forgiveness: <https://www.amazon.com/Just-Forgiveness-Responsible-Excusing->

[Injustice/dp/0830837019/ref=sr\\_1\\_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504190&sr=8-4&keywords=worthington+forgiveness](https://www.amazon.com/Injustice/dp/0830837019/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1547504190&sr=8-4&keywords=worthington+forgiveness)