Forgiveness and Romantic Relationships in College: Can It Heal the Wounded Heart?

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This study evaluated the effects of two versions of a six-week group forgiveness intervention for college women who had been wronged in a romantic relationship. Participants (*N* = 58) were randomly assigned to a secular, religiously integrated, or no-intervention comparison condition. Participants completed a variety of forgiveness and mental health measures at one-week pretest, one-week posttest, and six-week follow-up. Participants in both intervention conditions improved significantly more than did those in the comparison condition on two measures of forgiveness and a measure of existential well-being. Program effects were maintained at six-week follow-up. Contrary to hypotheses, there were no differential treatment effects when comparing participants in the secular and the religiously integrated conditions. Participants generally rated the programs favorably. Forgiveness strategies utilized by participants also were examined. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. J Clin Psychol 58: 419–441, 2002.

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Introduction

Forgiveness is defined in this article as letting go of negative affect (e.g., hostility), negative cognitions (e.g., thoughts of revenge), and negative behavior (e.g., verbal aggression) in response to considerable injustice, and also may involve responding positively.

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toward the offender (e.g., compassion). Most authors concur that forgiveness should be distinguished from reconciliation (e.g., Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994; Freedman, 1998), legal pardon (e.g., Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991), condoning (e.g., Veenstra, 1992), and forgetting (e.g., Smedes, 1996). Conceptualizing forgiveness using these distinctions allows people to forgive without compromising their safety or their right to pursue social justice.

Evaluative studies have shown that forgiveness interventions can lead to improvements on measures of forgiveness (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; Freedman & Enright, 1996; McCullough & Worthington, 1995). Additionally, forgiveness interventions have been shown to lead to improvements in mental health, such as reduced anxiety (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996), reduced anger (Luskin & Thoresen, 1997, as cited in Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998), reduced depression (Freedman & Enright, 1996), reduced grief (Coyle & Enright, 1997), and increased hopefulness (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Freedman & Enright, 1996). With the exceptions of Coyle and Enright (1997) and Freedman and Enright (1996), these interventions were administered using a group format with an intervention duration between 1 and 9 hours (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Several components were common to these interventions, including helping participants to process their feelings related to the wrongdoing, providing education on the nature of forgiveness, and teaching various strategies for facilitating forgiveness. Examples of populations targeted by previous forgiveness interventions include post-abortive men (see Coyle & Enright, 1997), victims of incest (see Freedman & Enright, 1996), children deprived of love from their parents (see Al-Mabuk et al., 1995), elderly women (see Hebl & Enright, 1993), and college students who have experienced a variety of types of wrongdoing (see McCullough & Worthington, 1995). However, to our knowledge, no previous interventions have specifically targeted college students wronged in romantic relationships.

Forgiveness and Romantic Relationships in College

Many college students are wronged by romantic partners. Examples of transgressions that occur within romantic relationships of college students include infidelity (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995), courtship violence (Roark, 1987), date rape (Koss, Dinero, & Seibel, 1988), psychological abuse (Raymond & Bruschi, 1989), and unwanted relationship dissolution (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Those who have been wronged by romantic partners often experience significant emotional difficulties. For example, women who have been victims of date rape demonstrate more trauma symptoms than women who have not been raped (Shapiro & Schwarz, 1997). Victims of wrongdoing also frequently experience feelings of anger and hostility toward the wrongdoer. While anger can have adaptive functions, such as helping victims disengage from relationships that have caused pain (Davenport, 1991) and enhancing feelings of control (Novaco, 1976), it also can become maladaptive. For instance, hostility commonly is associated with physical problems (Barefoot, Dahlstrom, & Williams, 1983).

Forgiveness and Religion

Studies have found a positive correlation between religion and the value placed on forgiveness (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Poloma & Gallup, 1991; Rokeach, 1973; Shoemaker & Bolt, 1977). However, there is a dearth of empirical data regarding the degree to which individuals rely upon religiously based strategies to help them forgive, and whether religion enhances the effects of forgiveness.
Forgiveness interventions rooted explicitly in religious language and practices may be especially effective. Pargament and Rye (1998) have outlined several ways that religion can contribute to forgiveness. First, forgiveness can be sanctified, or imbued with divine-like qualities. By virtue of its association with the divine, forgiveness may, in the mind of the forgiver, become an especially powerful means of coping with wrongdoing. For some, religious sanctification of human relationships and human worth provide compelling reasons to forgive. In addition, religions provide numerous models for forgiving (e.g., Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Buddha) and promote worldviews that emphasize the importance of forgiveness (Rye et al., 2000). Finally, religion can provide congregational and, in theistic religions, divine support for the forgiveness process.

The Present Study

In this study, we attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Would participants in both secular and religiously integrated group forgiveness interventions improve more on measures of forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness of a specific offender, forgiveness across situations, forgiveness knowledge) as compared to participants in a no-intervention comparison condition? We hypothesized that participants in both intervention conditions would improve more than participants in the comparison condition on the forgiveness measures.

2. Would participants in secular and religiously integrated group forgiveness interventions improve more on measures of mental health (i.e., anxiety, depression, hope, hostility, and spiritual well-being) as compared to participants in a no-intervention comparison condition? We hypothesized that participants in the intervention conditions would improve more than comparison participants on measures of mental health.

3. Would there be differential program effects between a forgiveness intervention that explicitly encouraged religious/spiritual beliefs and practices (i.e., religiously integrated) and a forgiveness intervention that excluded religious/spiritual concepts (i.e., secular)? We hypothesized that participants in the religiously integrated condition would improve more than participants in the secular condition on all measures of forgiveness and mental health.

4. Would college women who had been wronged in a romantic relationship rate group interventions favorably? We hypothesized that, in general, participants would find the forgiveness interventions to be rewarding and relevant to their lives.

5. What strategies would participants use when trying to forgive? We hypothesized that, in contrast to comparison participants, intervention participants would make greater use of forgiveness strategies encouraged during the interventions, such as drawing upon social support, using others as models for how to forgive, and thinking about ways that they have hurt others in the past. Additionally, we hypothesized that participants in the religiously integrated condition would report greater use of religiously based forgiveness strategies than participants in the secular or comparison conditions.
Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 58$) consisted of Christian women from a medium-size Midwestern state university who were enrolled in psychology classes. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 ($M = 18.8, SD = 1.1$). The majority of participants were first-year college students (69%) and Caucasian (90%). Participants had experienced a variety of types of wrongdoing within their romantic relationships, including infidelity (50%), emotional/verbal abuse (38%), physical abuse or threats (24%), deceit (19%), rape or other form of sexual assault (14%), broken commitment/unwanted relationship dissolution (14%), or other (24%). Percentages add to more than 100 because some participants indicated that they were wronged in more than one way. When asked how long ago they were wronged, participants reported the following: less than 1 year (50%), between 1 and 2 years (28%), or more than two years (14%). Several participants (8%) did not respond to this question. No participants reported being in physically abusive relationships at the time of the study. On average, participants were moderately religious (Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale, range = 10 to 43, $X = 25.6, SD = 8.8$). They reported a variety of Christian religious affiliations, including Catholic (41%), Protestant (33%), and Nondenominational (26%).

Group Leaders

Three advanced female doctoral students in clinical psychology served as group leaders. A licensed clinical psychologist supervised group leaders. They received 1 hour of training before leading groups, and they attended weekly supervision meetings during the course of the study. The following steps were taken to reduce the possibility that group leaders introduced systematic bias:

1. each group leader conducted both secular and religiously integrated forgiveness groups, and
2. the group leaders were not informed of the experimental hypotheses.

On a survey regarding their religious/spiritual beliefs, all group leaders indicated that they held religious/spiritual beliefs but were not involved actively in a religious organization during the course of the study.

Procedure

Participants initially were recruited through a brief announcement during psychology classes about the opportunity to participate in a psychoeducational group focusing on forgiveness. All female students in attendance were provided with a one-page survey to determine if they met selection criteria. In order to be eligible for the study, students had to:

1. be a female who was at least 18 years of age,
2. indicate they were experiencing distress related to being wronged by a romantic partner, and
3. indicate they would feel comfortable if assigned to a group in which participants would be encouraged to draw upon their Christian beliefs.
The study was limited to women because it was reasoned that some women who had been wronged in heterosexual romantic relationships might feel less comfortable sharing in a group that included males. The third criterion enhanced informed consent and helped ensure that all participants would be comfortable with the goals of the group to which they were randomly assigned.

Approximately 10% (N = 153) of the 1500 Selection Criteria Forms that were distributed were returned. Of the individuals who returned forms, approximately 59% (N = 90) met all criteria for participation in the study. A member of the research team contacted by telephone the individuals who met selection criteria in order to confirm their willingness to participate and to provide them with an opportunity to ask questions.

Before the first group meeting, a clinician met briefly with five participants with elevated pretest scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (scores ≥ 30) to assess further their level of depression. Following this assessment, one individual elected to seek individual psychotherapy and withdrew from the study. The other four individuals were included in the sample. Three individuals declined to participate before the study due to scheduling concerns or lack of interest in the project. Several participants were eliminated from the sample because of incomplete data (comparison, N = 11; secular, N = 5; religiously integrated, N = 6). Participants assigned to the intervention condition who attended less than 4 of the 6 group sessions (secular, N = 2; religiously integrated, N = 2) also were eliminated from the sample because it was reasoned that they were not exposed to enough of the program to allow for adequate evaluation. Finally, students who had obtained additional psychotherapy during the course of the study were eliminated from subsequent analyses (secular, N = 1; religiously integrated, N = 1). After eliminating individuals from the sample in the manner described above, 58 participants remained in the study.

Participants randomly were assigned to one of the following three conditions: secular forgiveness, religiously integrated forgiveness, or no-intervention comparison. Due to difficulties matching participants' schedules with group meeting times, several participants (N = 7) had to be reassigned to alternate conditions. After assignment to a condition, participants in the intervention conditions (i.e., secular, religiously integrated) were assigned to 1 of 10 subgroups consisting of 4 to 8 members. Assignment to specific subgroups was based primarily upon participants' schedules. Students in all three conditions (i.e., comparison, secular, religiously integrated) completed evaluation measures at 1-week pretest, 1-week posttest, and 6-week follow-up.

Instruments

Process Measures. The authors designed three process measures (i.e., Group-Leader Session Survey, Program Feedback Survey, and Forgiveness Strategies Scale) for this study.

Group Leader Session Survey. After each intervention session, group leaders recorded the date, session number, program type (i.e., secular vs. religiously integrated), and attendance figures on the Group Leader Session Survey. They also indicated whether they covered all activities outlined in the manual and whether they devoted adequate time (as suggested by the manual) to each activity. Finally, group leaders answered a true–false question regarding whether they encouraged group members to draw upon their religious/spiritual beliefs during the session.

Program Feedback Survey. Following the last intervention session, participants completed the Program Feedback Survey. The survey consists of 9 Likert-type items with
response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Sample items include “I enjoyed this program” and “I would recommend this program to a friend.” In addition, open-ended questions assessed which program activities were most and least helpful.

Forgiveness Strategies Survey. Participants completed the Forgiveness Strategies Survey at posttest and follow-up. This scale assessed the degree to which participants used forgiveness strategies explicitly encouraged in at least one of the interventions. Nine items were constructed on a Likert-type scale with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). Sample items include “I asked God for help and/or support as I was trying to forgive” and “I relied upon support from my friends when trying to forgive.” An additional item allowed participants to write in a forgiveness strategy that was not listed.

Demographic/Background Information

Participants reported their age, year in school, race, and religious affiliation. Participants also responded to several questions regarding the nature of their offender’s actions (i.e., type of wrongdoing, how long ago wrongdoing occurred).

Intrinsic Religiousness. Intrinsic religiousness was assessed at pretest using the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972). The scale consists of 10 items with a Likert-type scale format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree). Sample items include, “One should seek God’s guidance when making every important decision,” and “My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.” In the present study, Cronbach αs across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .90 to .92. Scores on this scale can range between 10 and 50, with lower scores indicating higher levels of religiousness.

Proximal Outcome Measures

Measures of forgiveness were identified as “proximal” because they pertain most directly to the goals of both interventions. Based upon previous research, it was hypothesized that both interventions would lead to increased forgiveness toward a specific offender, increased willingness to forgive across situations, and increased knowledge about forgiveness. Thus, several measures of forgiveness were used in this study (i.e., Forgiveness Scale, Forgiveness Likelihood Scale, Forgiveness Concept Survey) and are described below.

Forgiveness of a Specific Offender. The authors created the Forgiveness Scale for this study to assess the degree to which participants had forgiven the romantic partner who wronged them. Similar to the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (Subkoviak et al., 1995), items were created to measure affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to wrongdoing. Questions were included based upon whether they measured important indicators of forgiveness as suggested by the research literature. Questions also were designed to assess both positive and negative responses to wrongdoing. The scale consists of 16 Likert-type items with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Sample items include “I can’t stop thinking about how I was wronged by my romantic partner” and “I feel resentful toward the romantic partner who wronged me.” Psychometric data on a slightly modified version of the questionnaire revealed that
the scale has adequate psychometric properties (Rye et al., in press). In this study, Cronbach αs across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .82 to .91. Scores on this scale can range between 16 and 80, with higher scores reflecting more forgiveness toward the offender.

Likelihood of Forgiving across Situations. The authors created the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale for this study to assess how likely participants were to forgive when considering hypothetical situations in which they were wronged. The idea for this scale was based upon the Willingness to Forgive scale created by Enright and his colleagues (see Hebl & Enright, 1993). Scenarios were designed to assess a variety of types of wrongdoing (e.g., infidelity, slander, theft) to which college students would likely be able to relate and provide a meaningful judgement. The scale consists of 10 items using a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Extremely likely). A sample item states, “One of your friends starts a nasty rumor about you that is not true. As a result, people begin treating you worse than they have in the past. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive this person?” The scale has adequate psychometric properties (Rye et al., in press). Cronbach αs for this scale across three points in time (pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .88 to .89. Scores on this scale can range between 10 and 50, with higher scores indicating greater likelihood of granting forgiveness across situations.

Forgiveness Knowledge. The authors created the Forgiveness Concept Survey for use in this study to assess knowledge of forgiveness. The scale consists of 10 Likert-type items with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Sample items include, “Forgiveness involves suppressing the fact that you are angry,” and “ Forgiveness involves forgetting about how you were wronged.” The “correct” answers for this scale are based on the theoretical conceptualizations of forgiveness as outlined in this study. This scale was included as an outcome measure because enhancing knowledge of forgiveness was an important goal of both interventions. Cronbach αs on the Forgiveness Concept Survey across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .55 to .80. Scores on this scale can range from 10 to 50, with lower scores reflecting greater adherence to the conceptualization presented during the intervention.

Distal Outcome Measures

Based upon theory and previous research findings, it was hypothesized that the forgiveness interventions would improve several aspects of mental health. The selected mental health measures (i.e., anxiety, depression, hope, hostility, religious well-being, existential well-being) were identified as “distal” because improvement on them was not specifically targeted during the interventions. Four other scales were excluded from the final analyses due to high correlations with other outcome measures or inadequate psychometric properties. Additionally, participants in the intervention conditions completed open-ended questions about the impact of the program at posttest and follow-up.

Anxiety. The Costello and Comrey Anxiety Scale (Costello & Comrey, 1967) was used to measure participants’ level of anxiety. The scale consists of 9 items measuring various symptoms of anxiety. Examples of items include, “When faced with excitement or unexpected situations, I become nervous and jumpy” and “I get rattled easily.” Items were constructed on a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Never)
to 9 (Always). In this study, Cronbach \( \alpha \)s for the scale across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .85 to .88. Scores on this scale can range between 9 and 81, with higher scores indicating more anxiety.

**Depression.** The Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) was administered to assess participants' level of depression. The inventory consists of 21 multiple-choice items, with four response possibilities provided for each question. Each response is assigned a number (i.e., ranging from 0–3), with higher numbers corresponding with greater symptom severity. Sample response choices for a question on discouragement include, “I am not particularly discouraged about the future,” and “I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve.” In the present study, Cronbach \( \alpha \)s across each point in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .90 to .92. Scores on this scale can range from 0 to 63, with higher scores reflecting greater depression.

**Hope.** The Anticipation of a Future subscale from the Miller Hope Scale (Miller & Powers, 1988) was used to assess participants' hopefulness. The subscale consists of 6 Likert-type items with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Sample items for the subscale include, “I look forward to enjoyable things,” and “I spend time planning for the future.” In the present study, Cronbach \( \alpha \)s across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .69 to .84. Scores on this scale can range from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater hope.

**Hostility.** The Hostility subscale of the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to assess changes in hostility because of the intervention. The subscale consists of 8 items on a Likert-type scale, with response choices ranging from 1 (Extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 5 (Extremely characteristic of me). Sample items include, “At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life,” and “I am suspicious of overly friendly strangers.” In this study, Cronbach \( \alpha \)s across each point in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) ranged from .84 to .87. Scores on this scale can range from 8 to 40, with higher scores reflecting greater hostility.

**Spiritual Well-Being.** The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983) was used to assess participants' sense of spiritual well-being. Two subscales (Religious Well-Being, Existential Well-Being) consist of 10 items each that are constructed on a Likert-type format, with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). Sample items from the Religious Well-Being scale include, “I have a personally meaningful relationship with God,” and “I believe that God is concerned about my problems.” Sample items from the Existential Well-Being scale include, “I feel very fulfilled and satisfied with life,” and “I feel good about my future.” In this study, Cronbach \( \alpha \)s across three points in time (i.e., pre-, post-, follow-up) for the Religious Well-Being Scale were .91 to .96 and for the Existential Well-Being Scale were .87 to .91. Scores on both subscales can range between 10 and 60, with higher scores reflecting greater well-being.

**Open-Ended Questions.** Participants in the intervention conditions completed open-ended questions about the impact of the program at posttest and follow-up. At posttest, participants were asked, “How has involvement in the forgiveness group affected you (if at all)?” At follow-up, participants were asked, “What changes in yourself (if any) have occurred as a result of your participation in the forgiveness group?”
Interventions

Both forgiveness interventions (i.e., secular, religiously integrated) consisted of 6 weekly sessions. The content of each 90-minute session differed across groups only with respect to the emphasis on religion/spirituality. Group leaders did not refer to religion/spirituality in secular forgiveness groups, whereas they actively encouraged participants to draw upon their religious/spiritual resources in religiously integrated forgiveness groups. Although the intervention content incorporated a variety of sources, the sequence of topics roughly corresponded to the process outlined by Worthington (1998), who posited that forgiveness involves five steps: recall the hurt, develop empathy toward the offender, altruistic gift, commitment to forgive, and hold on to the forgiveness. Each intervention was conducted in accordance with an instructor manual.

Session 1

Secular Forgiveness Group. After introductions and the establishment of group rules, the group leader conducted a guided meditation (adapted from Patterson, 1996) designed to enhance awareness of members’ feelings, cognitions, and behaviors pertaining to the wrongdoing. Following the meditation, participants shared with other group members the nature of the wrongdoing they experienced and how the wrongdoing had affected them. Finally, a home exercise was assigned in which participants were asked to write a letter to their offender. This letter, which was to remain unmailed, was designed to help participants further express and understand the ways in which they have been affected by their offender’s wrongful actions.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. The initial session for religiously integrated participants included all of the elements above, with several modifications. When discussing group guidelines, group leaders emphasized the importance of respecting each member’s religious beliefs. In addition, during the meditation, the subsequent discussion, and the home exercise, participants were asked to consider how their religious/spiritual lives had been affected by their offender’s wrongdoing.

Session 2

Secular Forgiveness Group. Group members shared portions of their home exercise letters and tried to identify themes. Participants then were encouraged to explore their feelings of anger. Group members discussed the manner in which they typically handle anger. They were encouraged to consider both positive functions of anger (i.e., protection, increased energy, communication) and negative functions of anger (i.e., aggression, hostility, attachment to resentment, scapegoating). Finally, the home exercise was described briefly, in which participants were asked to make an inventory of the grudges they maintain and to examine how their negative self-statements could make it more difficult to let go of their grudges.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. The second session for religiously integrated participants included all of the above elements, with several modifications. Particular attention was paid to how anger is portrayed in New Testament scripture through important figures such as Christ and Paul. The reading passage in the home exercise asked participants to consider how harboring grudges had affected their religious/spiritual lives.
Session 3

Secular Forgiveness Group. Participants shared their grudge lists with other group members. Subsequently, participant dyads considered a vignette in which a woman makes several negative self-statements as the result of a break-up (e.g., her boyfriend had ruined her life, she would never be able to trust a man again). The participant dyads then practiced replacing maladaptive cognitions with adaptive cognitions. The group leader introduced forgiveness as a possible strategy for dealing with anger and hurt resulting from an offender’s actions. A definition of forgiveness was provided and distinctions were made between forgiveness and the following concepts—forgetting, condoning, legal pardon, reconciliation. Time was spent at the end of the session discussing the home exercise regarding lessons that can be learned from emotional pain.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. In the religiously integrated session, individuals participated in all of the activities described above, with several modifications. During discussion of the home exercise, participants were encouraged to consider how grudges affect one’s religious/spiritual life. In addition, participants were encouraged to consider how negative and unsubstantiated self-statements are contrary to how God views them. Participants were encouraged to generate religiously/spiritually based anger-management strategies (e.g., prayer, scripture memorization). The importance of forgiveness was considered from a Christian theological perspective. Finally, the home exercise focused on how prayer can be helpful when trying to forgive.

Session 4

Secular Forgiveness Group. Participants began by sharing their responses to the home exercise. A review of the definition of forgiveness was followed by a discussion of the potential benefits and drawbacks to forgiveness. Discussion also focused on the factors that make forgiveness difficult. Group members were encouraged to explore the implications of the fundamental attribution error for the process of forgiveness (as recommended by McCullough, 1996). Participants then were encouraged to consider their offender’s positive qualities. Finally, the group leaders described the home exercise that involved reading a passage (adapted from Smedes, 1996) about a woman who chose to forgive although she had experienced considerable wrongdoing.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. Religiouly integrated members participated in the activities listed above, with several modifications. Group leaders encouraged participants to draw upon their religious/spiritual resources when considering reasons to forgive and how to overcome the difficulties of forgiveness. In particular, group leaders encouraged participants to view forgiveness as a “leap of faith.” Group leaders also emphasized the role of compassion as outlined by Christian theology when discussing the fundamental attribution error. Finally, the home exercise contained a reading passage (adapted from Smedes, 1996) about a woman who had experienced considerable wrongdoing and drew upon her religious faith to help her forgive.

Session 5

Secular Forgiveness Group. This session began with a discussion of the reading passage assigned for homework. Much of the session focused upon exploring ways in which group members have hurt other people, which is an important component of the
forgiveness process (Halling, 1994). This was accomplished through a meditation (adapted from Patterson, 1996) and a general group discussion. Next, a therapeutic ritual involving forgiveness was initiated. The group leader handed each group member a rock and stated that the rock symbolized the pain that they had endured as a result of their offender’s wrongful actions. After time was allowed for reflection, group members were encouraged to consider whether they wished to let go of the rock as an indication that they were ready to let go of their emotional pain and bitterness. Group members who were not ready to take this step were encouraged to hold onto their rocks as long as they needed. Finally, participants were assigned a reading passage for homework that described a metaphor for the forgiveness process.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. Religiously integrated participants received all the components mentioned above, with several modifications. During the discussion of the home exercise, participants were encouraged to consider how they can draw upon their religious/spiritual resources when attempting to forgive. Discussion regarding ways in which participants have hurt others was connected to scripture references about human fallibility. The reading passage assigned for homework included passages describing how the protagonist drew upon her religious/spiritual resources to accomplish her goal.

Session 6

Secular Forgiveness Group. Group leaders began the session with a discussion about reconciliation. Participants were encouraged to consider several factors before deciding whether reconciliation was appropriate (e.g., personal safety, contrition by the offender, behavior change by the offender, desire for reconciliation by both parties). Group leaders neither encouraged nor discouraged reconciliation, but emphasized that participants should consider their own personal safety when making a decision. Discussion then focused on the home exercise and the forgiveness process. Participants were encouraged to identify how far along they were in the forgiveness process. A brief discussion regarding relapse prevention was initiated. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon the forgiveness process and to share their thoughts with group members.

Religiously Integrated Forgiveness Group. Participants in the religiously integrated group participated in all of the activities described above, with several modifications. Participants were encouraged to consider reconciliation from a religious/spiritual perspective. Discussion of the forgiveness metaphor from the homework reading emphasized that the protagonist drew upon her religious/spiritual resources to reach her goals. Finally, religious/spiritual techniques (e.g., prayer, scripture memorization) were considered when discussing relapse prevention.

Comparison Condition

Participants in the comparison condition received no special intervention. These participants were provided with the telephone numbers for campus-based mental health agencies in the event that they wished to obtain services. However, questions asked at posttest and follow-up revealed that none of the participants assigned to the comparison condition received mental health services during the course of the study.
Results

Preliminary Analyses

Examination of Pretest Differences. ANOVAs were computed on continuous demographic variables (i.e., age, intrinsic religiousness), and χ²'s were computed on categorical demographic/background variables (i.e., year in school, length of time since wrongdoing, race) to determine whether there were any significant pretest differences across conditions. No significant pretest differences were found across conditions on any of the demographic variables. ANOVAs showed that there were almost no significant pretest differences across conditions on the proximal outcome variables (i.e., forgiveness measures) or the distal outcome variables (i.e., anxiety, depression, hope, hostility, religious well-being, existential well-being). However, a significant pretest difference was found with respect to Anticipation of Future, $F(2, 55) = 3.88, p < .05$, with participants in the secular condition scoring significantly lower (i.e., less hope) than participants in the religiously integrated and the comparison conditions. Thus, pretest scores were used as a covariate on subsequent analyses involving this measure.

Outcome Evaluation

Comparison of All Three Conditions on Proximal Outcome Measures. A separate repeated measure ANOVA was computed for each proximal outcome measure to compare participants across conditions. According to this design, Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) was analyzed as the within-subjects effect, and Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) was analyzed as the between-subjects effect.

Of primary interest in these repeated measures ANOVAs are the Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) × Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions. It was hypothesized that the participants in the treatment conditions would improve more than participants in the comparison condition on all proximal outcome measures. As recommended by Stevens (1986), Bonferroni corrections were applied separately to proximal and distal measures to control for Type I error. Thus, the p-value required for significance for the three proximal outcome measures was set at .017 (i.e., .05/3). In all tables displaying analyses, we have provided the reader with significance levels both before and after application of the Bonferroni correction. As shown in Table 1, significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) × Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions were found on two out of the three proximal outcome measures (i.e., Forgiveness Scale, Forgiveness Concept Survey).

A significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow up) × Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interaction was found on the Forgiveness Scale, $F(4,108) = 7.77, p < .001$. Follow-up repeated measures ANOVAs computed on each condition separately showed that participants in the treatment conditions improved significantly at posttest and maintained gains or continued to improve at follow up. Participants in the comparison condition made no improvement at posttest, but improved at follow-up. However, overall, participants in the treatment conditions improved significantly more over time than participants in the comparison condition.

In addition, a significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) × Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interaction was found on the Forgiveness Concept Scale, $F(4,102) = 5.47, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses revealed that participants in both of the treatment conditions improved significantly at posttest and maintained gains at follow-up, whereas participants in the comparison condition made no improvements at posttest or follow-up.
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness Likelihood(b)</td>
<td>23.88</td>
<td>27.11*</td>
<td>29.26</td>
<td>23.40</td>
<td>27.60*</td>
<td>29.35</td>
<td>25.26</td>
<td>30.58**</td>
<td>31.90</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>7.77***‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness Scale(b)</td>
<td>48.58</td>
<td>50.82</td>
<td>56.64***</td>
<td>47.39</td>
<td>62.00***</td>
<td>63.60</td>
<td>50.21</td>
<td>64.79***</td>
<td>69.53**</td>
<td>7.77***‡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness Concept(b)</td>
<td>26.87</td>
<td>26.84</td>
<td>26.88</td>
<td>26.74</td>
<td>21.00***</td>
<td>19.85</td>
<td>24.11</td>
<td>19.16***</td>
<td>18.53</td>
<td>5.47***‡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distal Measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety(a)</td>
<td>43.63</td>
<td>39.74*</td>
<td>39.53</td>
<td>44.00</td>
<td>41.82</td>
<td>36.90*</td>
<td>40.74</td>
<td>39.74</td>
<td>36.95</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beck Depression(c)</td>
<td>12.96</td>
<td>8.90**</td>
<td>10.90</td>
<td>13.85</td>
<td>5.31***</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>4.96**</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>2.70*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of Future(d)</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>26.74</td>
<td>25.74</td>
<td>25.10</td>
<td>26.68**</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>28.32**</td>
<td>28.11</td>
<td>2.70*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility(a)</td>
<td>23.90</td>
<td>23.42</td>
<td>21.79</td>
<td>23.65</td>
<td>19.69***</td>
<td>18.30</td>
<td>22.50</td>
<td>20.05*</td>
<td>18.95</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Well-Being(b)</td>
<td>49.47</td>
<td>49.11</td>
<td>45.54*</td>
<td>47.50</td>
<td>51.20**</td>
<td>49.78</td>
<td>48.37</td>
<td>52.42**</td>
<td>51.63</td>
<td>3.45*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential Well-Being(b)</td>
<td>44.68</td>
<td>47.16*</td>
<td>43.50*</td>
<td>43.08</td>
<td>48.05***</td>
<td>51.62**</td>
<td>48.41</td>
<td>51.59*</td>
<td>52.63</td>
<td>5.35***‡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Significance levels within each condition were obtained by computing follow-up repeated measures ANOVA on each condition separately. Posttest means were contrasted with pretest means and follow-up means were contrasted with posttest means.

Mauchly’s test of sphericity revealed that, in all cases, sphericity was maintained.

\(a\)Lower means on these measures signify greater accordance with intervention program goals.

\(b\)Higher means on these measures signify greater accordance with intervention program goals.

\(c\)Statistically significant after a Bonferroni correction was applied to correct for Type I error. As recommended by Stevens (1986), Bonferroni corrections were applied separately to proximal and distal measures.

The corrected \(p\) value for analyses involving proximal measures was .017. The corrected \(p\) value for analyses involving distal measures was .008.

\(d\)Pretest scores were used as a covariate for analysis.

\(*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.\)
Contrary to hypotheses, no significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interaction was found with respect to the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale.

**Comparison of All Three Conditions on Distal Outcome Measures.** A separate repeated measures ANOVA was computed for each distal outcome measure to compare participants across conditions. Bonferroni corrections were applied to the distal measures to control for Type I error. Thus, the \(p\)-value required for significance for the six proximal outcome measures was set at .008 (i.e., .05/6). It was hypothesized that the participants in the treatment conditions would improve significantly more than participants in the comparison condition on all distal outcome measures. As shown in Table 1, significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions were found on 1 of the 6 proximal outcome measures (i.e., Existential Well-Being).

Table 1 shows that a significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interaction was found on Existential Well-Being, \(F(4,102) = 5.35, p < .001\). Follow-up analyses revealed that participants in the secular condition improved significantly at posttest and made additional improvement at follow-up. Participants in the religiously integrated condition improved significantly at posttest and maintained gains at follow-up. In contrast, participants in the comparison condition improved significantly at posttest, but did not maintain improvements at follow-up. Overall, participants in the intervention conditions improved significantly more over time than participants in the no-intervention comparison conditions.

It should be noted that a \(p\)-value of < .05 was found on the Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions of several measures (i.e., Beck Depression, \(p = .035\); Anticipation of Future, \(p = .028\); Religious Well-Being, \(p = .011\)), with trends in the expected direction. However, after the Bonferroni correction was applied to control for Type I error, none of the Time \(\times\) Condition interactions on these measures achieved statistical significance, as predicted by the hypotheses.

Contrary to hypotheses, no significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions were found with respect to Anxiety or Hostility. Although follow-up analyses computed on each condition separately revealed that participants in some conditions made significant gains over time on these measures, no overall significant Time \(\times\) Condition interactions were obtained.

**Comparison of Secular and Comparison Conditions on Outcome Measures.** A separate repeated measures ANOVA was computed for those outcome variables on which significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions were found in order to compare treatment effects between the secular and comparison conditions. As shown in Table 2, participants in the secular condition improved more than participants in the comparison condition on the proximal outcome measures: Forgiveness Scale, \(F(2,36) = 13.88, p < .001\); Forgiveness Concept, \(F(2,34) = 11.19, p < .001\); and the distal outcome measure: Existential Well Being: \(F(2,34) = 10.76, p < .001\).

**Comparison of Religiously Integrated and Comparison Conditions on Outcome Measures.** A separate repeated measures ANOVA was computed for those outcome variables on which significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) \(\times\) Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated, comparison) interactions were found in order to compare
Table 2
Time × Condition F values for Repeated Measures ANOVAs Comparing Comparison vs. Secular Condition, Comparison vs. Religiously Integrated Condition, and Secular vs. Religiously Integrated Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Comparison vs. Secular</th>
<th>Comparison vs. Religiously Integrated</th>
<th>Secular vs. Religiously Integrated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proximal Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness Scale</td>
<td>13.88*** †</td>
<td>15.96*** †</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness Concept</td>
<td>11.19*** †</td>
<td>6.82** †</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Measure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential Well-Being</td>
<td>10.76***</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Comparison was statistically significant after a Bonferroni correction was applied to correct for Type I error. As recommended by Stevens (1986), Bonferroni corrections were applied separately to proximal measures. The corrected p value for proximal measures was .025 (.05/2). No correction was needed for the analysis involving the distal measure.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

treatment effects between the religiously integrated and comparison conditions. As shown in Table 2, participants in the religiously integrated condition improved more than participants in the comparison condition on the proximal outcome measures: Forgiveness Scale, $F(2, 35) = 15.96, p < .001$; Forgiveness Concept, $F(2, 33) = 6.82, p < .01$; and the distal outcome measure: Existential Well-Being: $F(2, 33) = 3.61, p < .05$.

Comparison of Secular and Religiously Integrated Conditions on All Outcome Measures. A separate repeated measures ANOVA was computed for each outcome measure to compare the participants in the secular and the religiously integrated forgiveness conditions. As indicated in Table 2, there were no significant Time (i.e., pretest, posttest, follow-up) × Condition (i.e., secular, religiously integrated) interactions on any of the proximal or distal outcome measures. Thus, the hypothesis that participants in the religiously integrated forgiveness condition would improve more than participants in the secular forgiveness condition on all outcome measures was not supported.

Responses to Open-Ended Questions About Program Effects. Participants in the intervention conditions responded to an open-ended question at posttest (i.e., How has involvement in the forgiveness group affected you, if at all?) and at follow-up (What changes in yourself, if any, have occurred as a result of your participation in the forgiveness group?) regarding the impact of the intervention on their lives. Responses to these open-ended questions were examined and sorted into categories. These responses should be interpreted cautiously, since the comparison participants were not asked to complete a similar question. Percentages sum to more than 100 because several participants provided responses that fell into more than one category. A common response at both posttest (secular, 70%; religiously integrated, 68%) and follow-up (secular, 40%; religiously integrated, 47%) was that the group helped participants to overcome anger and/or helped them to forgive their offender. Some participants indicated at posttest (secular, 15%; religiously integrated, 11%) and follow-up (secular, 50%; religiously integrated, 42%) that they were happier, more confident, and/or at greater peace with themselves. Several participants in the religiously integrated condition (posttest, 26%; follow-up, 5%) reported that the for-
giveness group enhanced their spiritual lives. Other responses included the following: established connections with other group members (posttest: secular, 40%, religiously integrated, 21%; follow-up: secular, 25%, religiously integrated, 0%), gained expanded perspective of oneself or the offender (posttest: secular, 15%, religiously integrated, 37%; follow up: secular, 10%, religiously integrated, 32%), improved skills and enhanced perspective regarding romantic relationships (posttest: secular, 5%, religiously integrated, 26%; follow-up: secular, 20%, religiously integrated, 16%). Importantly, no participants indicated that the intervention had an adverse effect on their lives.

Process Evaluation

Group Leader Session Survey. Responses from group leaders indicated that in all cases, they encouraged participants to draw upon their religious/spiritual beliefs during the religiously integrated groups, and did not encourage participants to draw upon their religious/spiritual beliefs during the secular groups. In addition, group leaders indicated that they covered all activities as outlined in the intervention manual and that they devoted adequate time (as suggested by the manual) to each activity.

Reported Use of Forgiveness Strategies. Participants’ responses to the Forgiveness Strategies Survey were examined to determine which strategies they used to help them forgive their offenders. The most commonly reported forgiveness strategies at posttest included: “I asked God for help and/or support as I was trying to forgive” (secular, M = 3.79; religiously integrated, M = 4.11; comparison, M = 4.29), “I relied upon support from my friends when trying to forgive” (secular, M = 4.05; religiously integrated, M = 3.22; comparison, M = 4.07), and “I prayed for the person who wronged me as I was trying to forgive” (secular, M = 3.42; religiously integrated, M = 3.89; comparison, M = 3.43). Interestingly, participants in the comparison condition reportedly were trying on their own to forgive, although they were not involved in the forgiveness interventions.

ANOVAs were computed separately for each item on the Forgiveness Strategies Survey to examine differences at posttest across conditions. Bonferroni corrections were applied to correct for Type I error with multiple comparisons. Thus, the p-value required for significance for these analyses was .006 (i.e., .05/9). Participants in the religiously integrated condition reported thinking about scripture passages significantly more, F(2,45) = 5.09, p < .001, than participants in the secular and comparison conditions. No significant differences were found on the ANOVAs computed on any of the other Forgiveness Strategy items at posttest. ANOVAs with Bonferroni corrections also were computed to compare conditions at follow-up with respect to the use of forgiveness strategies. No significant differences were found on the Forgiveness Strategy Survey items at follow-up.

Quantitative Program Ratings. The majority of participants in both conditions rated the program favorably on a variety of dimensions (e.g., enjoyment of program, willingness to recommend the program to a friend, usefulness of homework assignments, relevance of program content, group leader competence). A separate t test was computed for each item on the Program Feedback Survey in order to compare reactions to the secular and the religiously integrated forgiveness programs. Bonferroni corrections were applied to correct for Type I error with multiple comparisons. Thus, the p-value required for significance for these analyses was .005 (i.e., .05/10). As shown in Table 3, ratings of the religiously integrated forgiveness program were significantly lower (M = 4.43) than the ratings of the secular forgiveness program (M = 4.96) on a question measuring enjoy-
ment of program. There were no other statistically significant differences in ratings across any of the items.

**Qualitative Program Ratings.** Participants in both the secular and religiously integrated conditions responded to open-ended questions regarding which aspects of the program were most and least helpful. Categories were developed based upon participants’ responses. Percentages add to more than 100 because some participants provided multiple responses. The majority of participants indicated that they most liked a specific element of the group content (secular, 50%; religiously integrated, 53%) or the group discussion and support (secular, 54%; religiously integrated, 46%). Some participants indicated that they liked everything about the group (secular, 7%; religiously integrated, 7%). Of the religiously integrated participants, 11% indicated that they most liked the religious component, and 11% did not respond to this question. With respect to what participants found least helpful, some participants cited a specific homework assignment or group activity (secular, 21%; religiously integrated, 36%). Several participants indicated that nothing in the program was least helpful (secular, 50%; religiously integrated, 32%), and several participants did not respond to this question (secular, 32%; religiously integrated, 14%). Of the religiously integrated participants, 11% indicated that the religious component was the least helpful.

**Discussion**

**Proximal Outcome Measure Findings**

Consistent with study hypotheses, participants in both the secular and the religiously integrated conditions improved significantly more on two measures of forgiveness (Forgiveness Scale, Forgiveness Concept Survey) than participants in the no-intervention comparison condition. The significant improvements on the Forgiveness Scale suggest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Secular (N = 28)</th>
<th>Religiously Integrated (N = 28)</th>
<th>T value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyed program</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.49**+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader was enthusiastic</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader was knowledgeable</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader tried to get everyone involved</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader was caring and related well to members</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend this program to a friend</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>2.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to use what I’ve learned</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignments were useful</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics were relevant to my life</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Items used a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

+Finding was significant after a Bonferroni correction was applied to correct for Type I error. The corrected p value needed for significance was .006 (i.e., .05/9).

*p < .05; **p < .01.
that the forgiveness interventions fulfilled their primary purpose—to facilitate forgiveness toward a specific offender. Additionally, when presented at posttest with an open-ended question about how the interventions affected them (if at all), 70% of the secular participants and 68% of the religiously integrated participants volunteered that the group helped them to overcome anger and/or helped them to forgive their offender. Participants in both treatment conditions also improved significantly more on a measure of forgiveness knowledge than participants in a no-treatment comparison condition. This suggests that another important goal of both interventions—enhancing knowledge about forgiveness—was achieved. In addition, this finding suggests that intervention participants generally embraced the conceptualization of forgiveness as outlined in the research literature. Similarly, other researchers have demonstrated improvements on forgiveness measures following forgiveness interventions (e.g., Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Freedman & Enright, 1996; McCullough & Worthington, 1995).

In contrast to Al-Mabuk et al. (1995), no significant treatment effects were detected with respect to a measure of willingness to forgive across a variety of hypothetical situations (Forgiveness Likelihood). One possible explanation is that the interventions focused primarily on helping participants to forgive their romantic partner rather than encouraging them to forgive other offenders. Additionally, it is possible that a longer intervention would be more likely to affect participants’ willingness to forgive across situations.

Distal Outcome Measure Findings

To our knowledge, this is the first study that has shown improvements in existential well-being following a forgiveness intervention. Interestingly, participants in the secular condition continued to improve at follow-up, while the participants in the religiously integrated condition maintained treatment gains. Furthermore, in both conditions, more participants at follow-up indicated on an open-ended question that the program had enhanced their sense of well-being (i.e., happier, more confident, more at peace, or more self-esteem) than on a similar question posed at posttest. Thus, it appears that some benefits of the intervention may have become increasingly salient to participants several weeks after the intervention ended. This illustrates the importance of including follow-up evaluations of forgiveness interventions.

Why did intervention participants improve with respect to existential well-being? Because participants in all three conditions generally reported using similar strategies to help them forgive, treatment effects cannot be explained adequately by differential use of forgiveness strategies. Perhaps participants in the treatment conditions used forgiveness strategies more effectively than participants in the comparison condition. It also is possible that treatment effects occurred, not because of the content of the programs, but because a group therapy modality was used. Many authors have pointed to the unique healing characteristics of groups (e.g., Ferencik, 1990; Yalom, 1995). However, individually administered forgiveness interventions also have resulted in significant mental health gains following treatment (e.g., Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996). In our view, the most likely explanation for the treatment effects involves a combination of the content of the interventions (i.e., facilitating forgiveness) and the modality employed (i.e., group therapy). Open-ended responses from participants provide support for this explanation. When asked which aspects of the program were most helpful, participants often cited both program content and support from other group members.

Contrary to hypotheses, no treatment effects were found with respect to measures of hope, depression, and religious well-being once Bonferroni corrections were applied to
correct for Type I error. However, it should be noted that before applying Bonferroni corrections, participants in both interventions demonstrated significant improvements on these measures as compared to participants in the comparison condition at a $p$-value of $<.05$. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that statistical significance with the Bonferroni corrections might have been obtained with a larger sample and increased statistical power. Indeed, other researchers have found that forgiveness interventions have resulted in increased hope (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995, Freedman & Enright, 1996) and decreased depression (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996). More research clearly is needed to examine the mental health benefits of forgiveness interventions.

Surprisingly, no significant treatment effects were detected with respect to hostility. However, it should be noted that several questions on the Hostility subscale of the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) focus on paranoid ideation. It is unclear whether the scale adequately measures other important indicators of hostility. Although the effects of forgiveness interventions on hostility have not been assessed previously, Luskin and Thoresen (1997, as cited in Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998) found that a forgiveness intervention resulted in a decrease of trait anger. In addition, no significant treatment effects were detected with respect to anxiety. In contrast, other researchers have found that forgiveness interventions led to decreased anxiety (e.g., Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996). As with the hostility measure, it was unclear whether the anxiety scale selected was an adequate measure of the construct. Of course, the possibility also exists that the hostility and anxiety scales were adequate, but that the interventions failed to affect these aspects of mental health.

**Comparison of Secular and Religiously Integrated Conditions**

Contrary to hypotheses, no significant differences were found on any of the proximal or distal outcome measures when directly comparing secular and religiously integrated conditions. Thus, one intervention was not clearly superior to the other. The lack of differential treatment effects might be explained in part by the similarities in content across the interventions. As noted earlier, participants in the secular condition reported use of religiously based forgiveness strategies, although they were not encouraged in the intervention. For many people, forgiveness may be inherently religious (Pargament & Rye, 1998). Finally, it is possible that secular and religiously integrated forgiveness interventions are equally effective. Perhaps forgiveness interventions can lead to improvements in mental health irrespective of religious emphasis. However, studies are needed to examine whether there are benefits to matching individuals to interventions based upon their level of religiousness.

**Process Findings**

Results from the Group Leader Session Survey suggest that group leaders administered both interventions as outlined in the manuals. Granted, group leaders were asked to self-report the degree to which they adhered to the intervention manuals. Future studies should consider having independent raters analyze audiotaped recordings of the session to assess adherence to the program. As measured by the Forgiveness Strategies Survey, participants in the religiously integrated condition reported thinking about scripture more than participants in the other conditions. Interestingly, participants in the comparison condition reported using forgiveness strategies, although they did not participate in an intervention. Why were comparison participants trying to forgive? Perhaps individuals who
volunteered to participate in the study already valued forgiveness as a response to wrongdoing, while individuals who did not value forgiveness decided not to participate. Thus, participants in the comparison condition already may have been motivated to forgive the person who wronged them.

The process findings also revealed that participants in both conditions reacted favorably to the forgiveness interventions. All of the mean ratings were on the favorable end of the Likert-type scale. There were almost no significant differences when comparing ratings across intervention conditions. However, participants in the religiously integrated condition provided significantly lower ratings with respect to enjoyment of the program than did participants in the secular condition. It is difficult to know for sure why secular participants reported enjoying the program more than religiously integrated participants. However, group leaders had observed anecdotally that the highly religious participants in the religiously integrated conditions appeared to respond more positively to the religiously based intervention material than the less religious participants. Interestingly, of the religiously integrated participants, 11% reported on an open-ended question that the religious component was the most helpful aspect of the intervention, and 11% indicated that the religious component was the least helpful. This illustrates the challenge of administering religiously based group therapy interventions in a manner that satisfies participants with varying levels of religiousness.

Study Limitations

Several limitations to the present study should be noted. To begin, participants in this sample had to meet stringent criteria for inclusion in the study (i.e., female, Christian, wronged by a significant other, willingness to participate in either a secular or religiously integrated group). Although the latter criterion helped enhance informed consent, it also resulted in a selection bias among participants that may limit the generalizability of the findings. It is unclear whether study results can be generalized to individuals who do not meet all of the study inclusion criteria.

This study also relied exclusively on self-report measures to determine whether change occurred. Participants' subjective reports of their distress levels over time are important indicators of change. However, having independent observers corroborate changes in the participants' behavior would strengthen the findings. Perhaps this could be accomplished in future studies by having a nominated friend complete measures related to participants' behavior change following the interventions.

Since the interventions consisted of a variety of techniques and activities, it cannot be determined which component(s) resulted in the treatment gains. However, multifaceted approaches to psychotherapeutic treatment often are employed, making this a common problem in psychotherapy outcome research. Additionally, this study cannot provide insight into whether forgiveness interventions are more effective than other psychotherapeutic approaches. Studies are needed to compare forgiveness interventions with other types of psychotherapeutic interventions to determine whether forgiveness provides additional benefits. An earlier attempt to answer this question by Hebl and Enright (1993) suggested that both a forgiveness intervention group and a general process group led to similar improvements in mental health.

Additional Considerations

Group Composition. The types of wrongdoing experienced by women in the psychoeducational groups were heterogeneous, although all of them had experienced wrong-
doing by a romantic partner. Yalom (1995) suggested that homogeneous groups may be more advantageous for brief interventions because they may have greater cohesiveness, less conflict, higher attendance, and may experience more rapid symptom relief. However, it often can be difficult to recruit enough participants with homogenous presenting problems to form a group. Additionally, heterogeneity is likely to be less problematic with psychoeducational groups as compared to nonstructured interpersonal process-oriented groups. Regardless of whether groups are heterogeneous or homogenous with respect to presenting problems, participants need to be screened to ensure that they can participate in the primary tasks of the group (Yalom, 1995).

Forgiveness and Abuse. Might some individuals who have been wronged in a romantic relationship place themselves at increased risk for being wronged again if they decide to forgive? In theory, this should not be the case, particularly if therapists emphasize that forgiveness is distinct from reconciliation. Responses to open-ended questions from participants in this study provide anecdotal evidence that the forgiveness intervention actually helped some participants stay away from unhealthy relationships. For example, one participant wrote, “I have learned not to let guys mistreat me or make me feel bad about myself, and if they do, I don’t put up with it.” Of all the participants in the group, there were no known instances in which an individual decided to return to a romantic relationship in which she was at risk of being harmed. However, it should be noted that anger initially might serve as a protective mechanism for some individuals.

We would like to offer the following recommendations with respect to facilitating forgiveness with women who have been wronged in a romantic relationship. First, it is essential that therapists make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Second, forgiveness should not be the focus of therapy if the client is currently a victim of courtship or spousal violence. In this instance, therapy should focus primarily on helping the client take the steps necessary to ensure her own safety. This does not preclude making forgiveness the focus of therapy at some point. Several of the women in this study who had previously been in abusive relationships indicated that forgiveness allowed them to achieve a sense of peace and inner strength. However, more research is needed on whether there are certain client personality characteristics or certain presenting problems for which forgiveness is contraindicated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has made several important contributions to the growing body of literature examining the effects of forgiveness on mental health. The study demonstrated that group forgiveness interventions for college women could lead to improvements on measures of both forgiveness and mental health, irrespective of whether the interventions include or exclude religion. The study also revealed that college women rated the interventions favorably and found them to be relevant to their lives. Interestingly, religiously based forgiveness strategies were among the most common strategies used by participants across all conditions. This seems to suggest that, at least for some individuals, forgiveness is tied intricately to religion/spirituality.

Many interesting questions remain regarding the effects of forgiveness on mental health. Do forgiveness interventions lead to improvements in mental health beyond other psychotherapeutic strategies? Would longer forgiveness interventions lead to increased therapeutic benefits? Would longer term follow-up evaluations reveal additional therapeutic effects of forgiveness interventions? Clearly, more empirical research is needed on the effects of forgiveness on mental health.
References


Forgiveness and Romantic Relationships


