

## FORGIVENESS AND THE INFLUENCE IN PSYCHOTHERAPY IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

By

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### Abstract

In this concise and general article, we give some basic conceptions of the forgiveness of the grand Religions, making at the same time a comparison of the concept of forgiveness between these Religions or cultures, in relation to the therapeutic dimension of the latter; something that in recent years —under the science of the Psychology of Religion— has seen the light of day, hundreds of empirical researches, which confirm the most above claim.

**Keywords:** *Psychotherapy, forgiveness.*

*“Without forgiveness, life is governed by...  
an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation”*  
(Roberto Assagioli)

### Introduction

Scientific interest in forgiveness has rapidly increased in the recent years (Ho & Fung, 2011). By the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, a large number of articles about forgiveness therapy began appearing in the *Mainstream Journal* (Enright, 1991). The title of this article could cover multiple volumes. However, in the context of an article we tried to summarize, as best as possible, a huge and vast material, just to give a taste of this dimension (of forgiveness) in Religions. That is why, and in advance, we are requesting the reader's discretion.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the meaning of the verb of forgiving is "*stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake*" (Bowker, 1997). Psychologically and socio-culturally, forgiveness is the process that involves a change in cognitions, emotions, motivations, and behaviors regarding the transgressor (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

The word forgiveness is written (סלח/salah) in Hebrew, and (ἀφίημι/afiimi) in Greek ancient, and (أَغْفَر / 'aghfar) in the Arabic language, and (原谅/ yuánliàng) in Chinese (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2021).

Interpersonal forgiveness between people can be divided into two types: A- definitive forgiveness: it is a decision to treat the perpetrator as a valuable person and not to avenge the perpetrator. B- emotional forgiveness: implies a decrease in negative emotions (i.e. dissatisfaction, bitterness, hostility, hatred,

anger, and fear) neutralizing them with positive other-oriented emotions (i.e., sympathy, compassion, altruistic love, or maybe romantic love). Any variable that helps people form their hostility will be important in facilitating physical health. If forgiveness is an alternative to cognitive doubt, it could also help mitigate the negative effects of life (Greenberge, 1995, pp. 1262-1296).

Psychology has not yet reached a consensus on the definition of forgiveness, but at least it agrees on a continuous "process" and psychologists have suggested several models that describe this process (Cordova et al., 2006). Some studies focus on interpersonal differences in the degree of forgiveness, such as people being neurotic and irritable, who are less likely to forgive the perpetrator even after a long time, and may even plan retaliation (Maltby, et al., 2008). But studies have shown that the circulatory system and nervous system of some people are healthier than those who cannot forgive others (Oyen, Ludwig & Laan, 2001). Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University found that learning can make people more tolerant and healthier.

### In Christianity

In Christianity the forgiveness of sins is the deepest rock on which a Christian bases his life (Kurt, 1965). Christian Theology clarifies that Jesus Christ died to atone for the sins of others in this sense. So, forgiveness does not depend on the repentance of the perpetrator to the victim, and few, if any sins are too serious to forgive (Marty, 1998). In the Christian Church, the institution of forgiveness is baptism, which must not be repeated, as mention in St. Paul's letter to Ephesus (4, 5: "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*"), and in the Acts of the Apostles (2, 38: "*And Peter said to them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*"). Forgiveness, however, means love i.e. sacrifice and therefore forgiveness is a central issue for any moral and any concept of mental health (Outler, 1954). In Christian therapy, the forgiveness model *REACH* is an effective model of promoting forgiveness that includes five steps: pain, withdrawal, develop empathy towards the perpetrator, providing an altruistic gift of forgiveness, a commitment to forgive (Norcross, 2011). The powerful and penetrating role of forgiveness in the Christian faith and the beliefs about human connection and altruism that inherent in spirituality is particularly consistent with a therapeutic approach to forgiveness (Eugene, 1995).

Passages from the Holy Bible:

Matthew 18, 18: "*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" (The Holy Bible, 1989). That is; I assure you that all sins you leave tied and unforgivable to the earth will remain tied and unforgivable in heaven. And all you forgive on earth will be forgiven and saved in heaven.

Matthew 18, 21: "*Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times*" (The Holy Bible, 1989).

Here we find in the Gospel that Jesus Christ teaches us how many times to forgive not only seven times, but seventy-seven times, namely without limit.

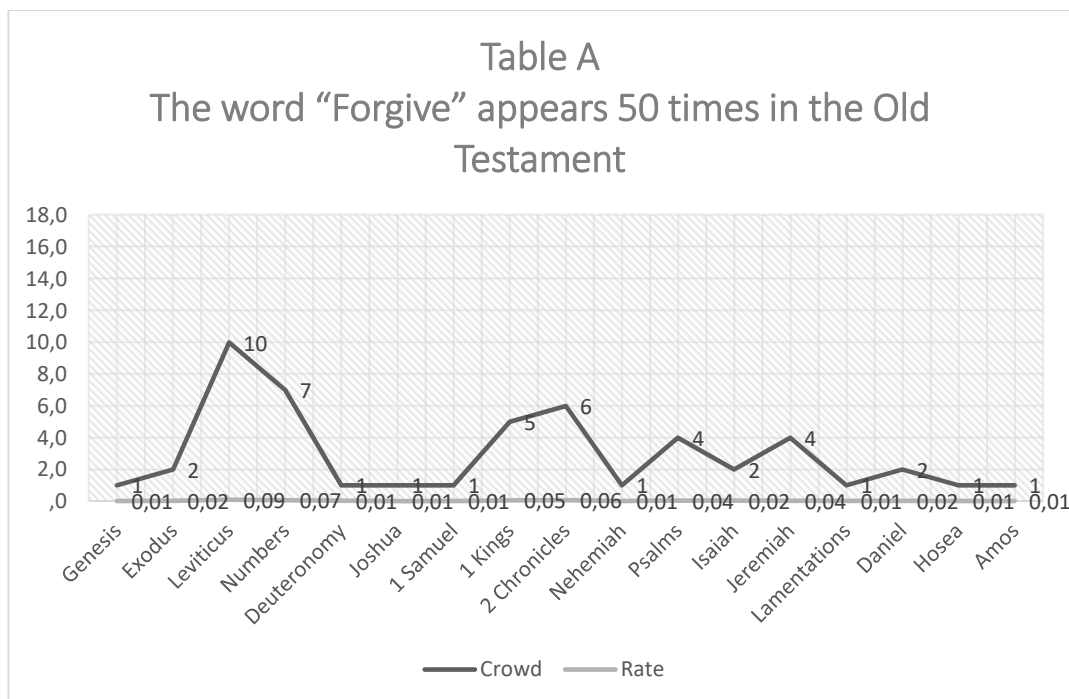
Mark 11, 25: *“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses”* (The Holy Bible, 1989). Jesus Christ tells us to forgive with all our hearts, if we have anything against someone, for our Heavenly Father to forgive our misdeeds.

According to traditional Christian teachings, the forgiveness of others is among the spiritual duties of the Christian character, God is considered as the source of each forgiveness, which is made possible through the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and means baptism eliminates the ancestral sin and this manifests itself as an answer to God's forgiveness.

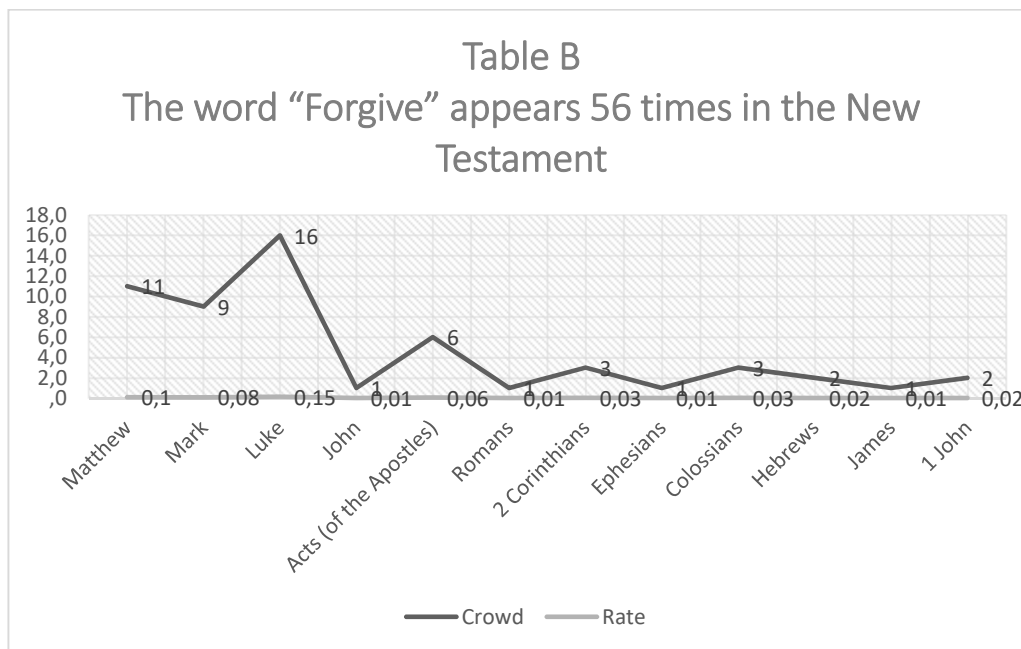
Matthew 6, 12: *“and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”*.

Luke 23, 34: *“And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (The Holy Bible, 1989). Here we find that forgiveness is an act that comes from the divine nature and is transmitted through the teaching of Christ in human nature for the salvation of the human soul. The Church believes that if offenders can repent and correct their behaviors, they should be forgiven in opposition to Judaism because Christian doctrine contains unconditional forgiveness, representing God's term of love.

In tables A and B, we see how many times the word "forgiveness" is mentioned in the Old Testament and the New Testament.



(The Holy Bible, 1989)



(The Holy Bible, 1989)

### In Judaism

Jewish Theology considers that forgiveness is very virtuous, but not for all offenses, also forgiveness cannot be extended by someone who was not the direct victim of an offense; some offenses are too serious to be forgiven and offenders must repent to offer them forgiveness. Also, forgiveness is considered an interpersonal process (Cohen et al., 2013).

Religious and spiritual forgiveness plays a large role in forgiving the offense of the person in the Jewish religious culture, and in forgiving, the offense must step in the religious act without overabundance. When you ask an offender for forgiveness you must sincerely forgive with a clear conscience and a willing spirit, for forgiveness is natural for the seed of Israel (Torah, *Teshuvah* 2:10). Man must apologize to those he has harmed to be entitled to forgiveness.

#### Prayer of Forgiveness from the Bedtime Shema

ריבונו של עולם הריני מוחל

ריבונו של עולם הריני מוחל וסולח לכל מי שהכעיס והקניט אותי או שחטא פגנדי. בין פגופי. בין פממוני. בין בכבודי. בין בכל אשר לי. בין באונס. בין פרצון. בין פשוגג. בין פמזיד. בין פדבור. בין פמעשה. בין פגלגול זה. בין פגלגול אחר. לכל בר ישראל ולא יענש שום אדם בסבתי. יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהי ואלהי אבותי שלא אחטא עוד ומה שחטאתי לפניך מחוק פרתמיה הרבים אבל לא על ידי פסורים ותלים רעים. יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יהנה צורי וגואלי

Ribono Shel Olam, I hereby forgive whoever has hurt me, and whoever has done me any wrong; whether it was deliberately or by accident, whether it was done by word or by deed. May no one be punished on my account. May it be Your will, O Lord my God, God of my parents, that I sin no more, that I do not revert to my old ways, that I do not anger You any more by my actions. May I do not do that which is evil in Your sight. Wipe away the sins that I have committed, with Your great compassion, but not through sickness or suffering. May these words of my mouth, and the prayers that are in my heart, are acceptable before You, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer (Ps. 19:13) (Zalman, 2009).

Yom Kippur's goal is to bring about reconciliation between people and

every person and God: "*The tenth day of the seventh month is a day of atonement. It will be a sacred occasion for you, it is a day on which He redeemed on your behalf before your Hashem God a Sabbath of absolute rest will be for you*" (Levi. 23: 26-32).

If someone has offended or injured another person, they are obliged to sincerely ask for that person's forgiveness. The victim of the offense is respectively obliged to forgive, provided that the request has been made sincerely. All-day participation in the synagogue, even if spent in intense prayer, will not clear the slate for offenses committed against other people; the only real transgressions forgiven on this day are those committed against God. It is the day when God completes His decisions about the fate of every man which is prayer "על הא/al het", which are horizontal writings in which our infringements have been acknowledged over the past year, in the order of a thousand verses. People slightly clenched their fists to their chests while speaking a word. Most of the violations cited are moral failures, such as other people's offenses, gossip, lack of respect for parents and teachers, use of profanity, or dishonesty at work.

The whole prayer "על הא/al het" recited in the plural, to remind us that each of us has a responsibility in the well-being of our society, as well as to save individuals from the embarrassment of certain failures, we ask God to bless us and judge us, and we pray to God to hear our prayers and increase our good deeds (Waskow, 1991).

### In Islam

In Islam, forgiveness does not mean the annulment of justice, because forgiveness can never replace justice. The (Allah/God) is the greatest forgiver, as well as the greatest judge. He forgives according to His righteousness (Islamic, 2001). Forgiveness is an important subject in Islamic spirituality, as mentioned in the Koran and translated into Arabic "(العَفَّارُ/Al-ghaffar)", "(التَّوَّابُ/Al-tawwab)" and "(العَفْوُ/Al-afuw)", that they represent three of the 99 names of God in Islam (Muhammad, 1999) and also is one of the most commonly used in prayer and often referred to by Muslim spiritual writers (Renard, 2002). Forgiveness is a virtue of power: "*Justice is closely bound to mercy, when Islam places justice next to mercy, places forgiveness next to justice - provided it is forgiveness while someone is strong*", in a conversation with Dr. Ali Issa Othman (Waddy, 1990). In Islam, there is no atonement for sin, nor a justification for the forgiveness of sins. The (Allah/God) simply forgives anyone who chooses to forgive. This following statement in the Koran, as well as many others, shows the conditional nature of the Islamic religious Content (Ankerberg & Weldon, 2001).

وَإِنِّي لَعَفَّارٌ لِّمَن تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا ثُمَّ اهْتَدَىٰ (طه - 82)

Verily I am forgiving toward him who repenteth and believeth and doeth good, and afterward, walked aright (Taha - 82).

### In Confucianism

Forgiveness in Confucianism, which is a moral and philosophical system, was originally developed based on the teachings of the Chinese intellectual and social philosopher Confucius, who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

In traditional Chinese culture, in the fifteenth chapter 15.24 of "The Analects of Confucius Yiren", the sentence "A gentleman's way is only faith and forgiveness". According to Confucius, the so-called "faith" is to treat others with all your heart, so the so-called "forgiveness" is to treat others like yourself used by Confucius student Zeng Shen.

15.24

子贡问道：“有没有一个可以终身奉行的字呢？”孔子说：“那就是恕吧！自己所不想要的也不要施加给别人。（Foundation, China Confucius, 2004）

In English:

Zi Gong asked, "Is there any word that we can use for the whole life?" Confucius said, "Forgive others. Do not give to others if you don't want it yourself".

4.15

孔子说：“参啊！我主张的道贯穿了一个基本概念。”曾子说：“是的。”孔子出去后，别的学生问曾参说：“那是什么意思？”曾子说：“夫子主张的道不过是忠恕罢了。（Foundation, China Confucius, 2004）.

In English:

Confucius said: "Shen! The Tao I advocate runs through a basic concept." Zeng Zi said: "Yes." After Confucius went out, other students asked Zeng Shen, "What does that mean?" Zeng Zi said, "The Master advocates. His way is nothing but loyalty and forgiveness".

The way of faith and forgiveness is an important content of Confucian thought; the treatment of others with faith and forgiveness is the basic requirement of kindness, that runs through all aspects of Confucian cultural thinking. In this chapter, Confucius said only that Tao has one for him.

This way of faith and forgiveness can be seen as an invention of Confucius. This invention has a great influence on future generations; the son considers the "Tao of faith and forgiveness" as a criterion for handling the relationship between people and ourselves, which is also the morality of Confucians. A feature of management. In this way, you can eliminate other people's dissatisfaction with yourself and facilitate interpersonal relationships, stabilizing in the same time the specific social order at the moment.

### **In Buddhism**

The view of Buddhists on forgiveness is that it needs to be achieved with repentance and commendable actions (Edkins, 1893). Buddhism asks for forgiveness of the wrongs that others have done to us and that we should not overlook the thought that incidentally escapes this morality, and that forgiveness and reconciliation are more profitable than revenge, and stresses that hostility does not end with hostility (Oldenberg, 1882). Buddhism recognizes that sin cannot be forgiven if we do not pay the penalty for every wrong act (Rice Hosea, 1890). Buddha said: "*the one who does not ask for forgiveness is guilty of Dukkha*".

*Dukkha* = suffering or pain (Branch, 1849). Anger is considered an evil enemy number one contra of Atman, leading to malice and moral fall. The act of forgiveness eliminates Atman's both inner and outer enemies, so forgiveness implies the strength of the body as well as the mind (Chitkara, 1999): "*He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me — in those who do not harbor such thoughts hatred will never cease*" (Dhammapada 1.3-4; trans. Radhakrishnan) (Cook, 2010)

### **In Hinduism**

In (Mahabharata/ "Maha" (= great) + "Barata" (race name), which means: "Great Barata"), next to Ramayana, one of the great Hindu epics, forgiveness is seen as the greatest virtue, as he says: "*Forgiveness is Brahma, truth, ascetic value and preservation, asceticism, holiness and the coherence of the universe*" (Ganguli, 2014). Thus, forgiveness is important with the *dharma* (= correct way of life) such as compassion, duty, and patience. In Hinduism, forgiveness is necessary if one chooses to follow the path right, according to Buddhism and Hinduism. Differently, unresolved issues such as anger will reappear in subsequent reincarnations through *karma*. However, it remains uncertain how these beliefs are treated in modern Hinduism, while forgiveness is described as a "removal" of the *negative* in contemporary Hinduism (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001). But in another branch of Hinduism, which denies the forgiveness of sins, there is no promise of fulfilling one or any purpose in the other world.

However, since the influence of these principles in practical life is the most important thing, let's further compare the two systems related to the phase and the hopes they give for later life (Robson, 1893). On the other hand, forgiveness is also recognized as one of the 10 virtues and refers to karma. Forgiveness is believed to be a sign of strength. The Indian spiritual and political leader, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), said that the inability to forgive relates to spiritually weak people. So, forgiveness is to be understood as a commandment to Hinduism. Reluctance to forgive and the continued presence of negative emotions or unresolved conflicts may exist in future lives (Balkin, 2020). Also, forgiveness adopts the approach of explaining the boundless mercy, grace, and compassion on behalf of a God or a spiritual master (*gurus*) or power (*daya, kārunya, Krupa*). In this model, forgiveness is presented as emotion, love, and devotion (*bhāvana, prema, bhakti*). In schools of religious studies where the concept of God is secondary or even free from forgiveness, it translates as a combination of human virtues that freedom forgives (Greenberg, 2007).

### **Secular and religious/spiritual forgiveness**

Is forgiveness a spiritual or religious practice? Several have argued that counselors and therapists should make greater use of religiously based practices in counseling and treatment (Loewenthal, 1995). The religious content strongly supports it and this shows that forgiveness is characterized as a remission of religious practice. Nonetheless, for religious people, tolerance somehow remains an abstract moral value, because it is not an ethical practice that makes people justify the lack of pardon.

Studies have shown that spiritual pardon is related to forgiveness. Moreover, the impact of pardon on forgiveness is influenced by religion. Religion functions as a moderate effect of beliefs among high religious belief groups, and this relationship is quite important (Davis et al., 2010).

Forgiveness is a process, not just a decision (Worthington, Everett, Sandage, & Berry, 2000) with skills of patience and constant effort and courage; then it will be effective.

Man's tolerance is multifaceted. Researchers agree what is not forgiveness: Grace, excuse, culpability, oblivion due to damage to conscious memory, reconciliation, and refusal to admit the good. So, forgiveness is not studied as a spiritual or religious practice. Notwithstanding these studies are based on the character of the people, even though people forgive, we don't know ultimately if spiritual forgiveness affects our health (Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000).

### **Forgiveness and psychosomatic health**

Several studies provide the positive effect of forgiveness on health (Oyen, Ludwig & Laan, 2001) especially in high physiological and emotional reactivity e.g. blood pressure, heart rate, and negative emotions from memories of damage.

Forgiveness is an effective training; the religious and spiritual nature of tolerance is related to improved health as well as spiritual development, such as falling in the existence of God who extracts more inner peace in man (William & Harold, 2005).

Particularly, what is the relationship that mediates between forgiveness and health (Pandora, 2003)? Is it when some psychological studies often focus on physical and sexual abuse by members of religion (Blunt, 1999)?

Psychology and religion could form a more collaborative and constructive partnership, each helping to bring out the best in each other (Barbour, 2000). Since the appearance of the human being, there has been forgiveness (McCullough, 2008). In our daily lives, inevitably we will have conflicts with others, even blows, and the way of coping after an injury is related to spiritual-religious acts next to the person's body and mind if it is healthy and if the interpersonal relationship and society are harmonious.

The research found that forgiveness helps victims eliminate anger, relieve pain and maintain physical and mental health (Giacomo & McCullough, 2006). Consequently, forgiveness helps to improve people's relationships, as well effectively heal psychological trauma. So, forgiveness has been used as a therapeutic intervention goal since the 1870s (Wade & Johnson, 2008).

The Enright team, after their search for forgiveness, came up with a great plan to help people with forgiveness. Therapeutic and educational interventions based specifically on the Enright forgiveness model have developed in recent decades. Research shows that the increase in the ability to forgive, especially as a therapeutic agent has a positive impact on the psychological health of the human being (Baskin & Enright, 2004). For example, Reed and Enright (2006) found in their research that women who had experienced emotional internal abuse in their relationships found changes in scores from low to medium in their participation in *Enright Forgiveness Inventory* (EFI). Subsequently, they



saw significant and effective reductions in anxiety and depression, and increases in self-esteem (Reed & Enright, 2006). Several empirical studies are available to support forgiveness as an effective treatment for those dealing with mental health issues after injustices (Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Stratton, Dean, Nonneman, Bode & Worthington, 2008).

After several attempts, the model eventually evolved into a forgiveness intervention and is the model used to date and is in the table below (McKay, Hill, Freedman, & Enright, 2007).

**Enright Forgiveness Process**  
**1998**

Uncovering Phase:

1. Examination of psychological defenses. (Kiel, 1986)
2. Confrontation of anger. (Trainer, 1981)
3. Admittance of shame, when appropriate. (Patton, 1985)
4. Awareness of cathexis. (Droll, 1984)
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the event. (Droll, 1984)
6. Insight that that injured might be comparing self with the injurer. (Kiel, 1984)
7. Realization that one may be permanently & adversely changed by the injury. (Close, 1970)
8. Insight into a possibly altered 'just world' view (Flannigan, 1987)

Decision Phase:

9. A change of heart, conversion, a new insight that old resolutions are not working (North, 1987).
10. Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option.
11. Commitment to forgive the offender. (Neblett, 1974)

Work Phase:

12. Reframing, through role taking, who the wrongdoer (Smith, 1981)
13. Empathy toward the offender. (Cunningham, 1985)
14. Awareness of compassion, as it emerges, toward the offender. (Droll, 1984)
15. Acceptance and absorption of pain. (Bergin, 1988)

Outcome/Deepening Phase:

16. Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and forgiveness process. (Frankly, 1959)
17. Realization that the self has needed others forgiveness in the past. (Cunningham, 1985)
18. Insight that one is not alone. (Universality, support)
19. Realization that the self may have new purpose in life because of the injury.
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive effect if this begins to emerge toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release.

The main effect of forgiveness is to reduce the deep anger or hatred of man. Anger is an important factor that endangers the physical and mental health of people. Anger is associated with coronary heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases (Swaffer & Hollin, 2001). It is also associated with certain common diseases such as cold or flu. Therefore, it can cause depression and anxiety (Sinikka, 2009). The study found that uncontrollable dynamic anger creates some problematic behaviors such as drug addiction, eating disorder; while on the other hand, the reduction of a person's anger helps maintain his heart health (Phillips, Henry, Hosie & Mine, 2008). Still, forgiveness is a good alternative for cognitive doubt, helping to reduce the negative effects of life events (such as interpersonal offenses in all its forms) and mitigating risk of mental health issues (Greenberg, 1995).

Depression and anxiety cannot be relieved, but the result of forgiveness is

the reduction of anger or hatred of the man. Therefore, the reaction of forgiveness may be more effective in dealing with individual anger. Over the past decade, forgiveness interventions have been used for victims of sexual abuse and interventions for promoting forgiveness have scientifically proven effective (Freedman & Enright, 1996).

According to McCullough, forgiveness is not motivation, but a change in motivation that is the transformation of the pro-social motivation of the offended person. In this process, positive behaviors replace negative behaviors and this process should be based on the affected person's empathy for the perpetrator (McCullough et al., 2001).

Sandage and Jankowski (2010) studied persistent forgiveness and mental instability. The relationship between quality mental health and psychological well-being shows that self-differentiation acts as an intermediate result (Jankowski & Sandage, 2010).

It is not denoted that forgiveness in psychotherapy answers all psychological problems. Most studies show that forgiveness therapy has a good effect on psychological problems caused by interpersonal injury. Interpersonal damage here includes damage between foreigners and also includes injuries among classmates and even injuries among family members (Louden-Gerber, 2009).

So, most studies have shown that forgiveness helps develop one's health; research on survivors of war in the Middle East found that forgiveness is negatively associated with depression and revenge and there is also a negative correlation between psychology and subjective well-being (Scull, 2010). Self-forgiveness has also been recognized as a healthy way to resolve harmful feelings of guilt and shame (Krentzman, 2016). Other studies found that between forgiveness and restraint there is a significant positive correlation. Also, research shows that between depression, forgiveness and cardiovascular condition, there is positive relationship, indeed cardiovascular pressure was being relieved, that is good for health (Whited, 2010). The researchers said that forgiveness tends to be beneficial, though not always, both for the forgiving person and for the general relationships of the people in whom the offense occurred. In particular, forgiveness seems to benefit not only physical health but also psychological well-being (Wade & Tittler, 2021). When we forgive ourselves, we are free to choose to forgive or not to forgive others; but, it can we make completely different choices than those who have hurt us (Davies, 2020).

Pearson's research revealed important correlations between universal love and positive effect. It is referred that universal love correlates negatively with measures that harm, psychological health, including negative effects, anxiety, and aggression; but it positively correlated with positive effects. Similarly, it is mentioned that there are positive associations between universal love and the related structures of compassionate love for humanity, self-compassion, empathy, the forgiveness of self and others and altruism (Trent, Beauregard, & Schwartz, 2019).

Also, the forgiveness of an older child towards abusing parents can extend forgiveness to a spiritual dimension, which can positively affect the physical and mental health of the child (Mahoney, Rye, & Pargament, 2007).

## Conclusions

The scientific study of forgiveness has come of age, with strong links to physical health, mental health, and the benefits of the relationship (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010).

Also, forgiveness and religiosity have strong relationships with physical and psychological well-being, since the healthy soul of man depends on the inner/spiritual degree of faith. So, religion affects our health and forgiveness is a religious and spiritual act given the fact that we find it in the holy books/texts as we saw in the above extracts of the traditional major religions or in religious centers.

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