“I Had Let Everyone, Including Myself, Down”: Illuminating the Self-Forgiveness Process Among College Students

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Current Knowledge

Background

• Prevalence of mental health disorders among college students (AAUCCD, 2016)

• Self-forgiveness research and health outcomes (Maltby et al., 2001)

• Unique mental health stressors for female college students (Richards et al., 2014).

Self-Forgiveness

• Self-forgiveness of Interpersonal vs. Intrapersonal Transgressions (Hall & Fincham, 2005)

• Emotional determinants of intrapersonal transgressions
  – Self-disappointment
  – Regret
  – Guilt vs. Shame
The Present Study

The Utility of a Qualitative Analysis

• *In-depth* review and synthesis of thematic participant experiences (Creswell, 1998)
• Inform measurement strategy and design
• Salient for the development of theory
• None to date in the self-forgiveness literature
The Present Study

- Heavy emphasis on a qualitative, thematic analysis (Creswell, 1998)

Two Broad Aims

- (1) Identify common intrapersonal transgressions college student experience via salient contextual themes
- (2) Examine the emotional determinants of the self-forgiveness process among college students

Focal Research Question

What are common situational contexts (i.e., contextual themes) and emotional determinants of self-forgiveness for intrapersonal transgressions that college students face in which they are able/not able to forgive themselves?
Method

Participants

• Sample of ($n = 88$) female college students from a Southeastern University
  – 18-23 years old ($M = 19.61$; $SD = 1.14$)
  – 100% Female
  – 57% White
  – 74% Christian-Identified
  – $MGPA = 3.39$ [2.48 – 4.00]

Procedures and Plan of Analysis

• Narrative Data Collection: Written recall of experienced transgression—prompts for event A and B, respectively
• Data Analysis: 88 interviews, (Event A = 40; Event B = 48) coded and thematically integrated using NVivo 11 Pro Software (Richards, 1999)
• Analysis & Verification of the Data:
  – Coding Procedures (Creswell, 1998)
  – Saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
  – Trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004)
Results

Event A Themes—Able to Forgive

(1) Academic Performance
(2) Sports Competition
(3) Trouble with friendships/roommates
(4) Alcohol involvement
(5) Cheating on romantic partner/Hooking up
(6) Self-harm

Emotional Determinants
  Self-disappointment
  Frustration/Anger
  Guilt/Regret
  Self-Hatred
  Dehumanization

Event B Themes—Unable to Forgive

(1) Academic Performance
(2) Alcohol Involvement
(3) Hooking Up
(4) Lying
(5) Toxic Personal Relations
(6) Self-Harm

Emotional Determinants
  Self-disappointment
  Self-directed anger
  Regret
  Sadness
  Guilt and Shame
Results

Figure 1.

Spectrum of severity of emotional distress of an intrapersonal transgression among college students

Dissappointment  Regret  Guilt  Shame

Stressful  Psychological Distress
Data Narratives

• Stressful Contexts

  – Academic Performance & Self-Disappointment:

    • #47 [Event B, Age = 18,W,c]: “I was embarrassed to admit to myself that I needed to do better...I felt as though I had let everyone, including myself, down.”

    • #29 [Event A, Age = 20,W,c]: “I didn’t put in as much effort as I could into studying for it...I was really disappointed in myself for not trying harder; but I was able to forgive myself and I said I wouldn’t do it again...”

  – Alcohol Involvement:

    • #8 [Event A, Age = 19,W,c]: “...We were drinking a lot and we got up on stage and danced...how embarrassing...I also made out with a random guy, which I never do. I just felt guilty that night because that’s not who I am.”
Data Narratives

• Psychological Distress

  – Hooking Up/Toxic Relations & Depressive Symptoms:
    • #44 [Event B, Age = 19,W,c]: “I let myself get completely lost in a toxic relationship. He had a lot of emotional problems, I thought I could help him despite how much I was suffering. I dropped my whole life for him when things ended, I went into a mild depression for a few months. Looking back, I let myself lose who I am and that’s why it’s still hard to forgive myself.”

  – Self-Harm & Worthlessness
    • #26 [Event A, Age = 20,W,c]: “I used to cut myself. Nobody was involved, but me. I felt worthless and had a lot going on with an ex and feeling unwanted that I felt like the physical pain would take away all of the other negative feelings I had.”

  – Cheating on Romantic Partner & Hopelessness
    • #26 [Event A, Age = 19,L,c]: “I cheated on my first love and he found out about it. This happened 3 years ago and it was the biggest heartbreak I have experienced thus far... I became very depressed and my self-worth and self-value plummeted... I cried a lot and mentally punished myself, thinking of myself as a disgusting careless human being. My actions went against everything I stood for. It took me a very very long time to forgive myself.”
Discussion

Strengths & Limitations

• In-depth analysis illuminated emotional constructs in quantitative studies (e.g., regret vs. guilt and shame; Hall & Fincham, 2005)
• The first to examine self-forgiveness among college students for both intrapersonal and interpersonal transgression contexts

• Limitations:
• Incorporate variation in qualitative methodology: phenomenology
• Expanded studies to include minorities and underserved populations, students with various religious/spiritual backgrounds

Clinical Implications

• Self-forgiveness = tool for assessment of risk at University counseling centers
• Assess Type as well as Severity of the Transgression; Timing of Event
• Assess emotional spectrum of experienced transgression with symptomatology
• Integrate the theory of self-forgiveness into the therapy process
• Provide psychoeducation to college students regarding the difference between intra vs. interpersonal transgressions
References


