

Psychological Concepts of Forgiveness

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and Health and the 5th International
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for the Study of Spirituality
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Learning Objectives

- By the end of this one-hour presentation, the participant will be able to
 - Describe the major psychological theories of forgiveness (i.e., stress-and-coping, interdependence, evolutionary)
 - Describe the emerging psychological theories of forgiveness (Virtue theory, cognitive theory, Worthington & Sandage's (2016) spirituality and religion theory of relational forgiveness, and exposure theory)
 - Describe two major intervention theories (i.e., Enright's process model, Worthington's REACH Forgiveness model)

Understanding Forgiveness

- Experienced as wrongdoer
 - Divine Forgiveness (God forgives people)
 - Self-Forgiveness (People wrestle with self-condemnation)
- Experienced as victim
 - **Person-to-Person Forgiveness** (our focus)
 - Social and Societal Forgiveness (see Enright, R. D., Y. -R. Lee, M. J. Hirshberg, et al. 2016. Examining group forgiveness: Conceptual and empirical issues. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 22.2: 153–162.)

Basic Theories of Forgiveness

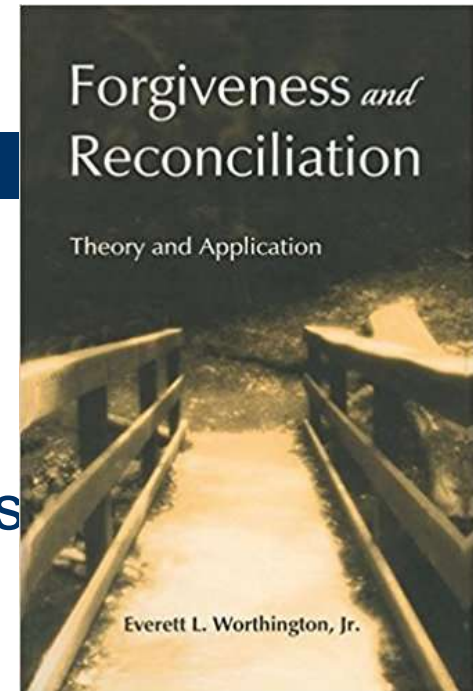
- Note: There are two types of theories—
 - those that seek to describe how people usually experience forgiveness (i.e., basic theories) and
 - those that seek to prescribe a pathway that an interventionist can guide a person through to achieve forgiveness (i.e., intervention theories, or more accurately models of intervention—which might be based more or less loosely on basic research).

Established Theories

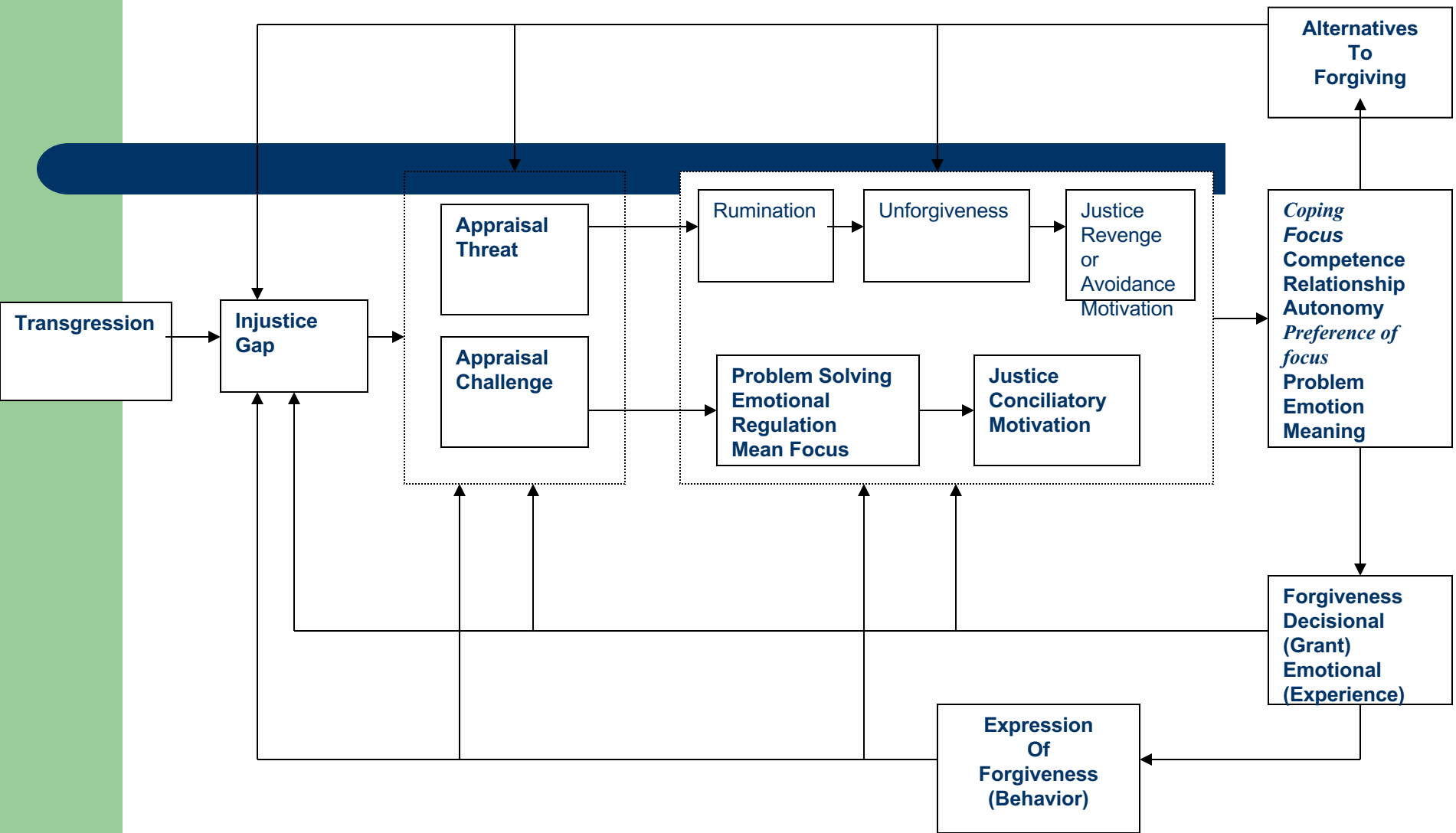
- Stress-and-coping theories
- Interdependence theory
- Evolutionary theory

Gold Standard: Stress-and-Coping Theories of Forgiveness

- Worthington (2006) and Strelan and Covic (2006)
- Both see injustices, hurts, and offenses as appraisals of transgressions. Unforgiveness is seen as a stress response (with motivational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral concomitants). Forgiveness is one possible type of coping response to modify the appraisal of the stressor and thus the stress response.



Model of Stress and Coping with Interpersonal Transgressions (Worthington, 2006)

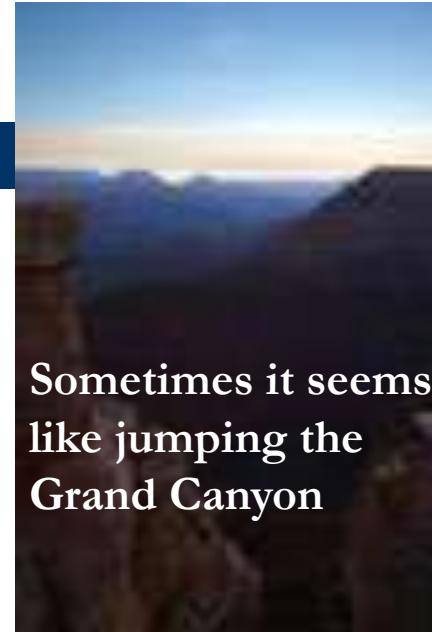


Injustice Gap: the gap between my ideal and the way that I perceive that things currently stand

Size of
injustice gap
is
proportional
to difficulty
forgiving.
Thus,



Small injustice
gap

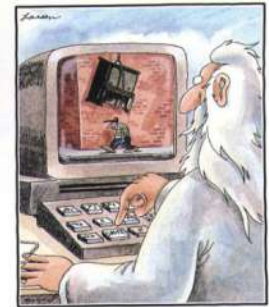
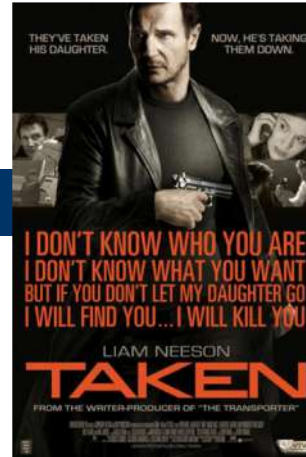


Sometimes it seems
like jumping the
Grand Canyon

Davis, D. E., Yang, X., DeBlaere, C., McElroy, S. E., Van Tongeren, D. R., Hook, J. N., Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2016). The injustice gap. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 8(3), 175-184.

We Have Coping Options

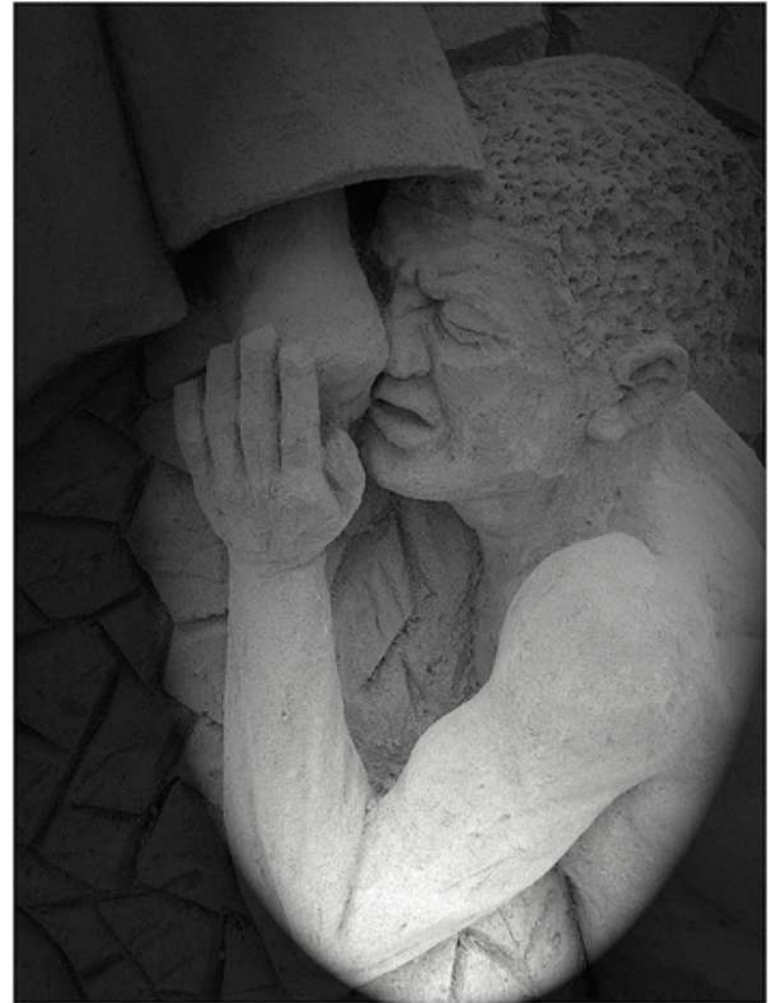
- Revenge
- Justice
- Turn it over to God
- Forbear
- Accept and move on
- Forgive
- These can all be pursued simultaneously



Wade, N. G., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2003). Overcoming interpersonal offenses: Is forgiveness the only way to deal with unforgiveness? *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 81, 343-353.

What forgiveness IS

- Two SEPARATE things:



Decisional Forgiveness

An intention statement stating one's intent to forswear revenge or avoidance and treat the person as a valued person

Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., Van Tongeren, D. R., DeBlaere, C., Rice, K. G., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2015). Making a decision to forgive. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 280-288.

We might decide to forgive and still feel Emotional Unforgiveness

A complex combination of negative emotions (i.e., resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear)



Worthington, E. L., Jr., Witvliet, C. V. O., Pietrini, P., & Miller, A. J. (2007). Forgiveness, health, and well-being: A review of evidence for emotional versus decisional forgiveness, dispositional forgivingness, and reduced unforgiveness. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 30, 291-302.

Emotional Forgiveness



Emotional forgiveness is defined as the emotional replacement by positive other-oriented emotions of negative unforgiving emotions.

Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Scherer, M. (2004). Forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy that can reduce health risks and promote health resilience: Theory, review, and hypotheses. *Psychology and Health*, 19, 385-405.

What are the Positive other-oriented emotions?

- **Empathy**
- **Sympathy**
- **Compassion**
- **Agape (altruistic) love**
- **Romantic love**



Facilitated by Positive Non-Self-focused Emotions

- Gratitude (for having been forgiven)
- Humility (recognition that I, too, have erred)
- Hope (toward the future)



Reminder: Don't Confuse DF, EF, and Reconciliation

Reconciliation: restoration of trust in a relationship where trust has been violated

DF=decision

EF=emotional experience

Both occur within our skin

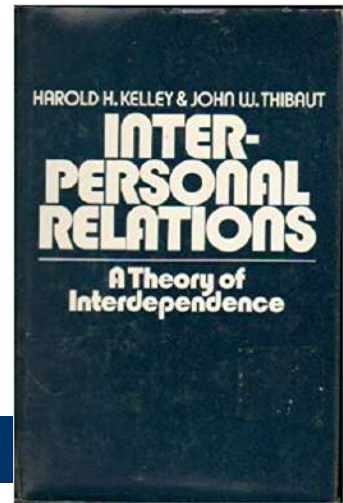
Forgiveness can promote reconciliation



Saying “I forgive you” is also not forgiveness.

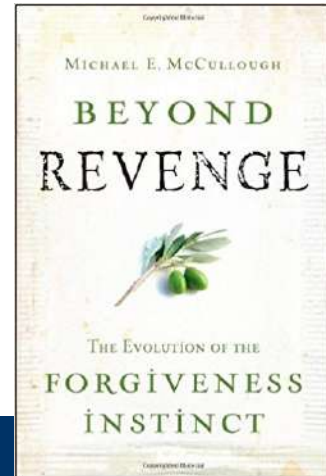


Interdependence Theory



- Thibaut and Kelley's (1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978)
- It is based on a mutual exchange of rewards and costs, balanced against each partner's expectations.
- Dilemmas (like transgressions) provide opportunity for partners to focus on either good for the **self** or good for the **relationship**, and are thus diagnostic (for partners).
 - When a partner reliably values the other partner over self-interest, individuals develop *trust*, which may lead to forgiveness. Frequent forgiveness builds trust. This results in a *mutual cyclical growth*

Evolutionary Theory



- McCullough (2008): Revenge and reconciliation (I don't think forgiveness evolved; it is of more recent social origin, and "evolved" socially.)
- An important finding from evolutionary theory is that people forgive valuable people more than those that don't matter as much.
- Another important finding from evolutionary theory is that people who are costly (risk of exploitation) are not as forgivable.
- Both suggest **in-group forgiveness > out-group forgiveness.**

Emerging Theories

- Virtue theory
- Cognitive theory
 - Ego depletion theory
- Worthington & Sandage's (2016) spirituality and religion theory of relational forgiveness
- Exposure theory

Virtue Theory



How we want to acquire virtue

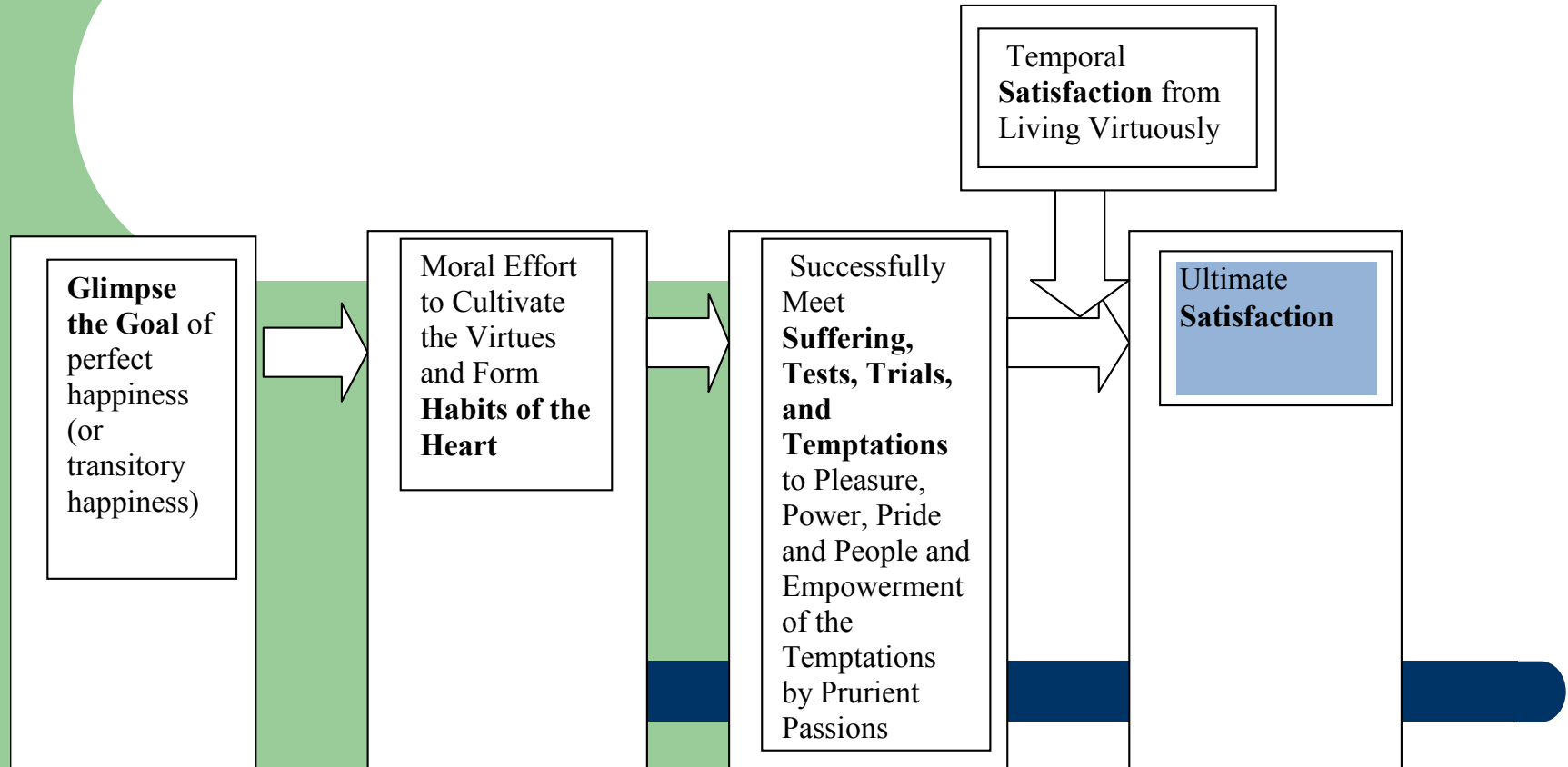


Isn't there some way we can just upload virtue into our being?

How We Have to Acquire Virtue



Christian Formation: Helping People (and Ourselves) Be More Christian Christians



Other Virtues Might Be Connected to Forgiveness, so Experiencing Other Virtues Potentiates Forgiveness

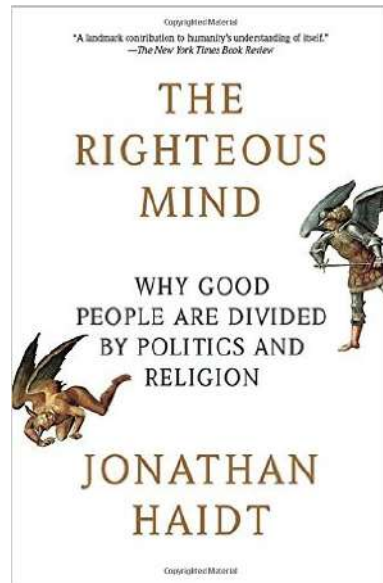
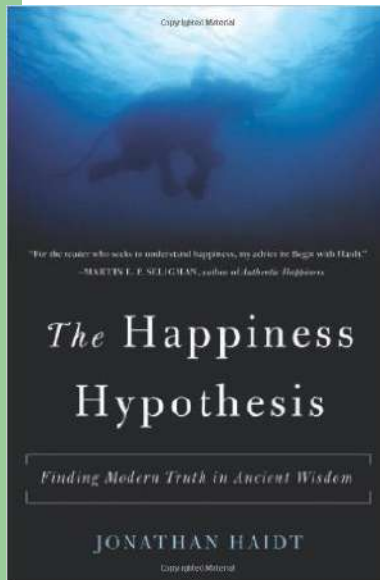
- Warmth-Based Virtues

- Humility
- Altruism
- Compassion
- Gratitude
- Love

- Conscientiousness-Based Virtues

- Self-Control
- Patience

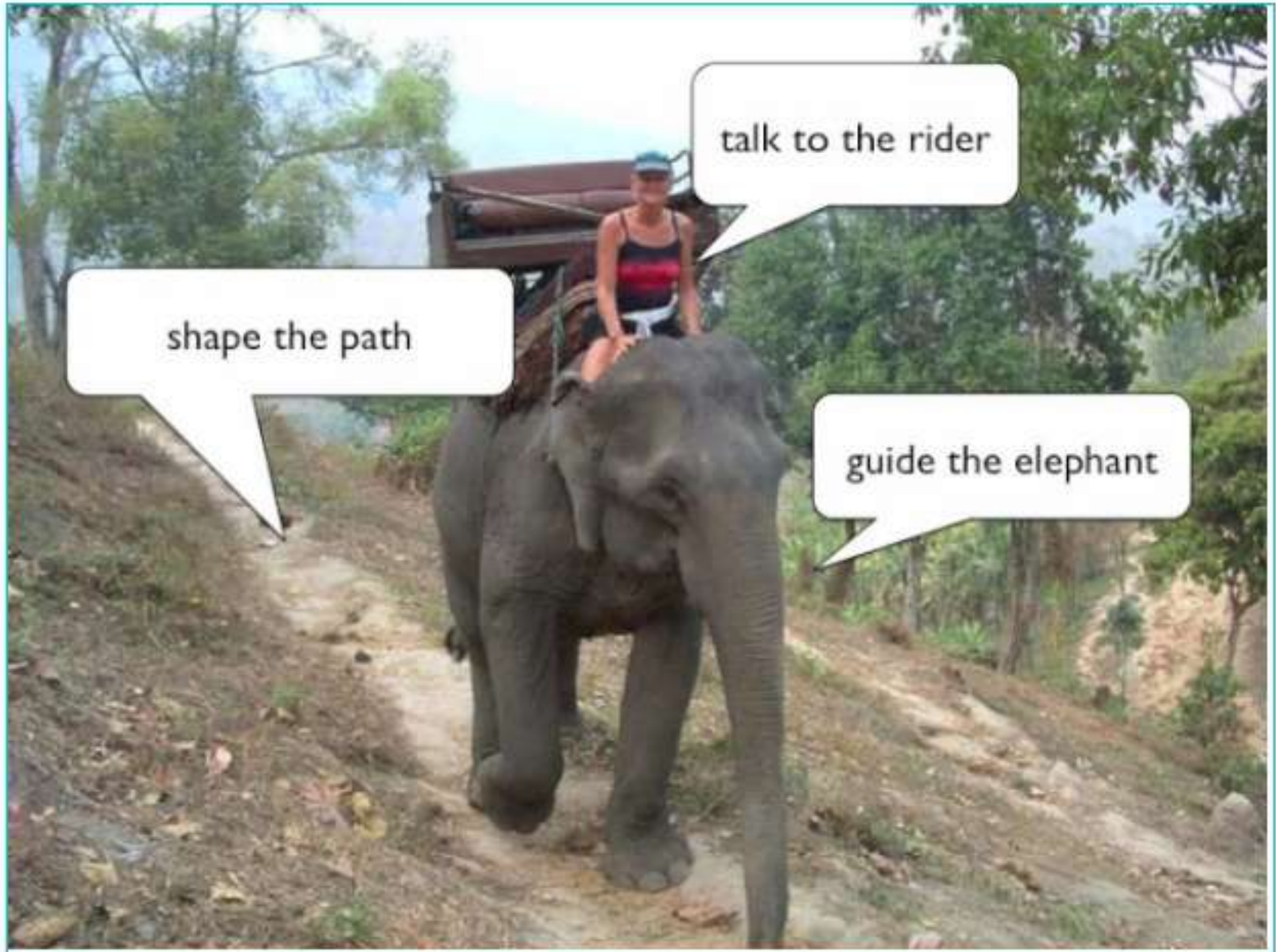
Cognitive Theory: Jon Haidt



Metaphor

- Implicit cognition = elephant
- Explicit cognition = rider
- Path = environmental track





shape the path

talk to the rider

guide the elephant

Ego Depletion



Roy Baumeister

- Roy Baumeister founder: Exerting effort depletes our energy and our ability to exert self-control again until our depletion has been restored. This is especially true if we are multi-tasking or switching from task to task frequently (e.g., working on a paper and checking email, phone, Facebook, Twitter, or internet frequently) or learning a new task.
- If chronic unforgiving rumination is playing in the background, this can deplete the ego. This is largely System 1. The more we try with effortful System 2, the more ego strain.
- CBT intervention methods can produce forgiveness—but (because they are System 2 activities) they will take their toll on other behavior in the person's life. Instead, can the person be led into implicit cognition (i.e., engagement in emotional motivational arts-oriented relational activities)?

Worthington and Sandage's Spirituality and Religion Theory of Relational Forgiveness

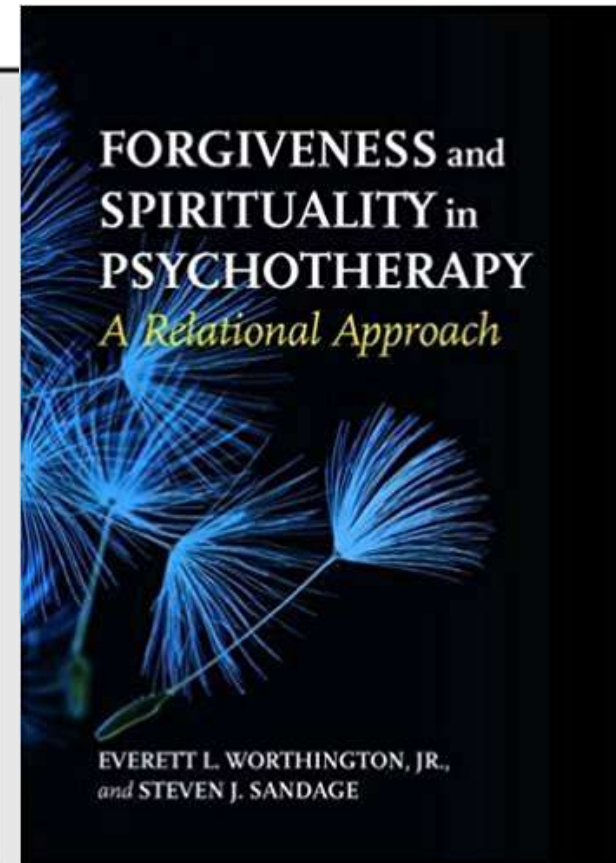
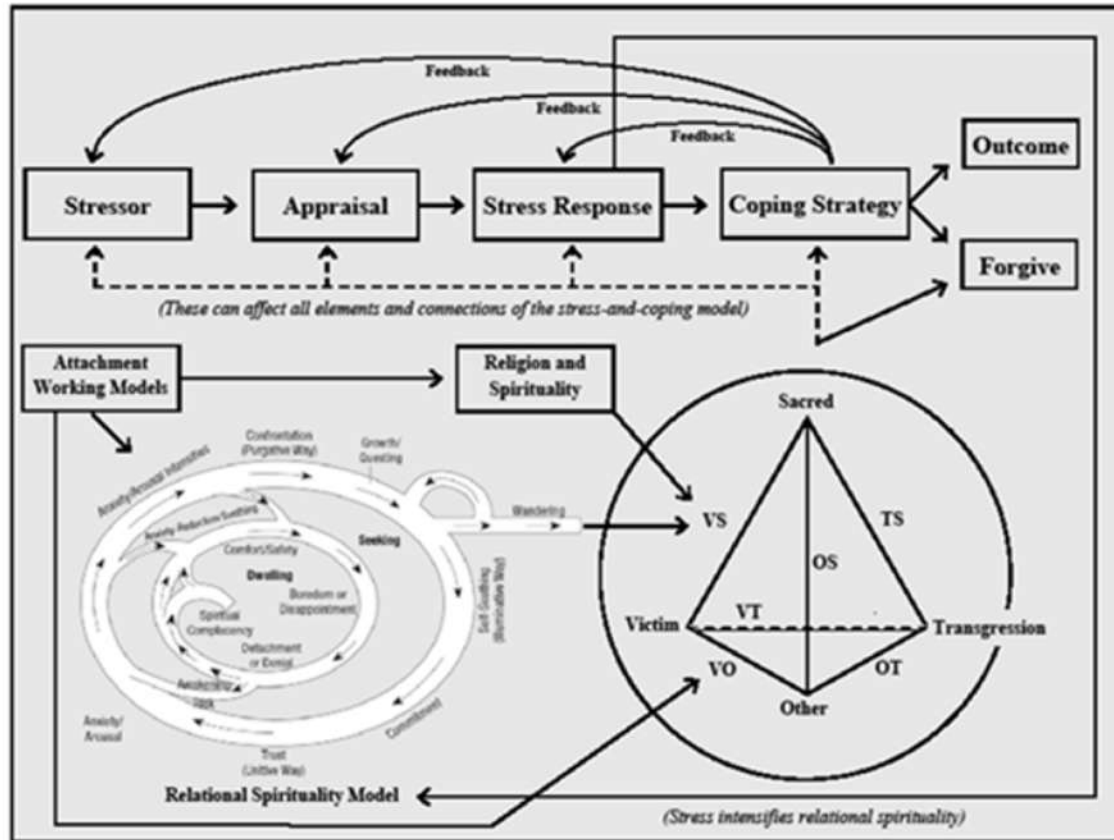


Figure 3-2

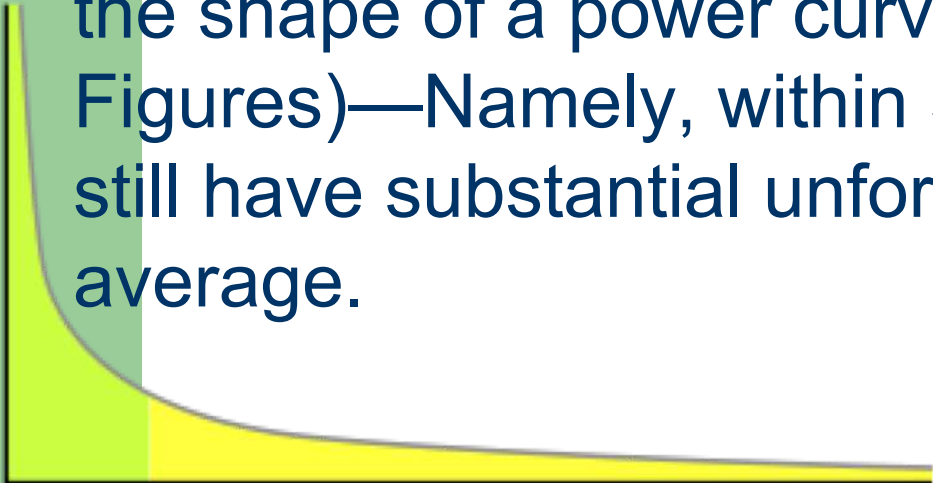
The full forgiveness and relational spirituality process model, which combines (1) the stress-and-coping model (top boxes) with (2) the relational spirituality model (circular figure in bottom left, which will be replaced with a revised picture, see below, after the first of the year), which is in turn affected by (3) the attachment working models (shown as a box with arrow pointed at the relational spirituality model) and connected with (4) the forgiveness and

Exposure Theory

- Born of findings that the more one engages in focus on forgiveness, there is a linear dose-response relationship with amount of forgiveness experienced.
- Also, virtually all treatments produce the same effect.
- Perhaps people can and do forgive by many paths, so mere exposure produces the same outcomes by many mechanisms

Unforgiveness and Laws of Nature

- McCullough, Luna Root, Berry, Tabak, & Bono (2010)
- Without intervention unforgiveness decreases in the shape of a power curve (see following Figures)—Namely, within 3 days, only about 7 % still have substantial unforgiveness. But, this is an average.



The curves for individual people that McCullough et al. used to derive the power curve

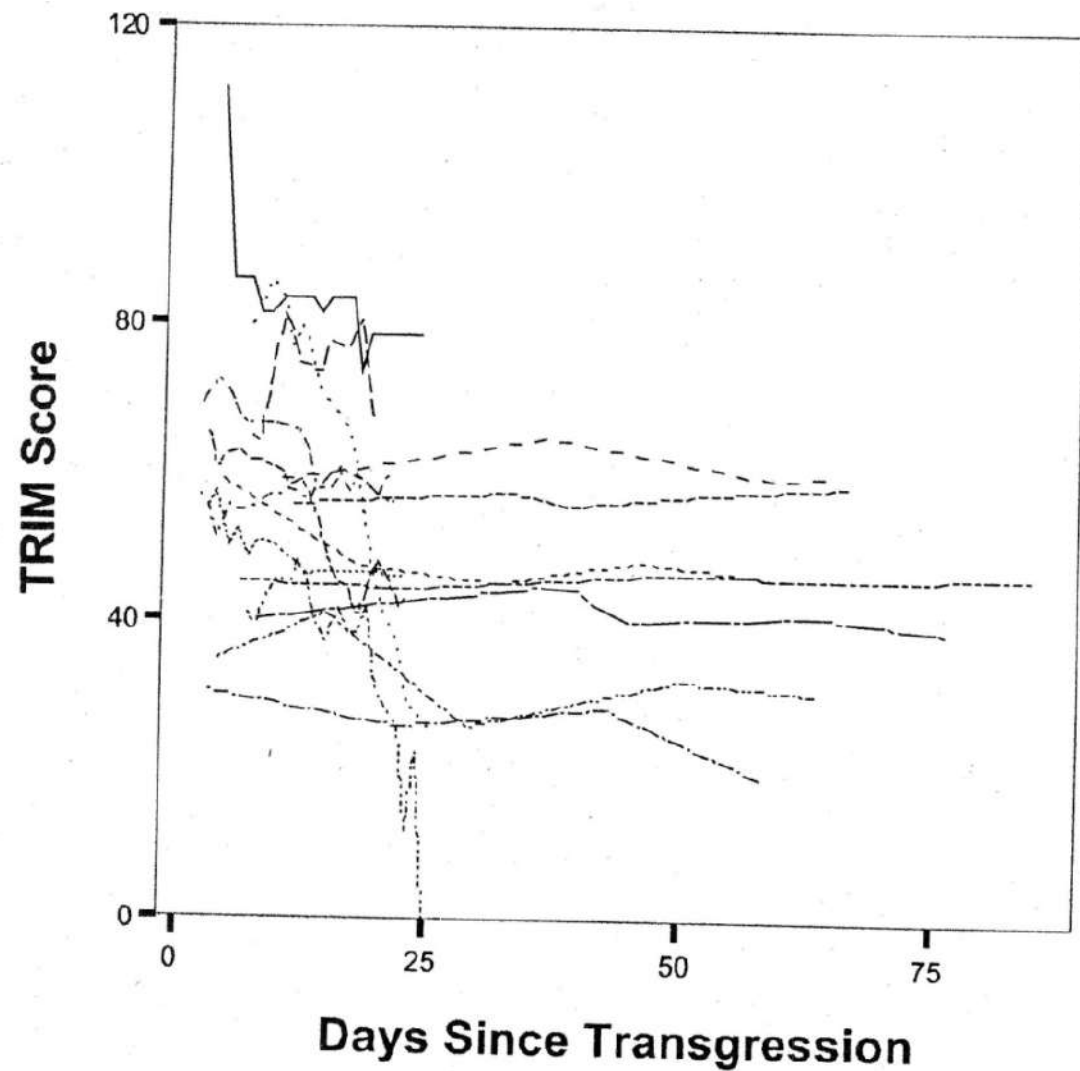


Figure 1. Trajectory plots for 15 randomly selected cases (Study 1).
From McCullough, Root Luna, Berry,
Tabak, & Bono (2010)

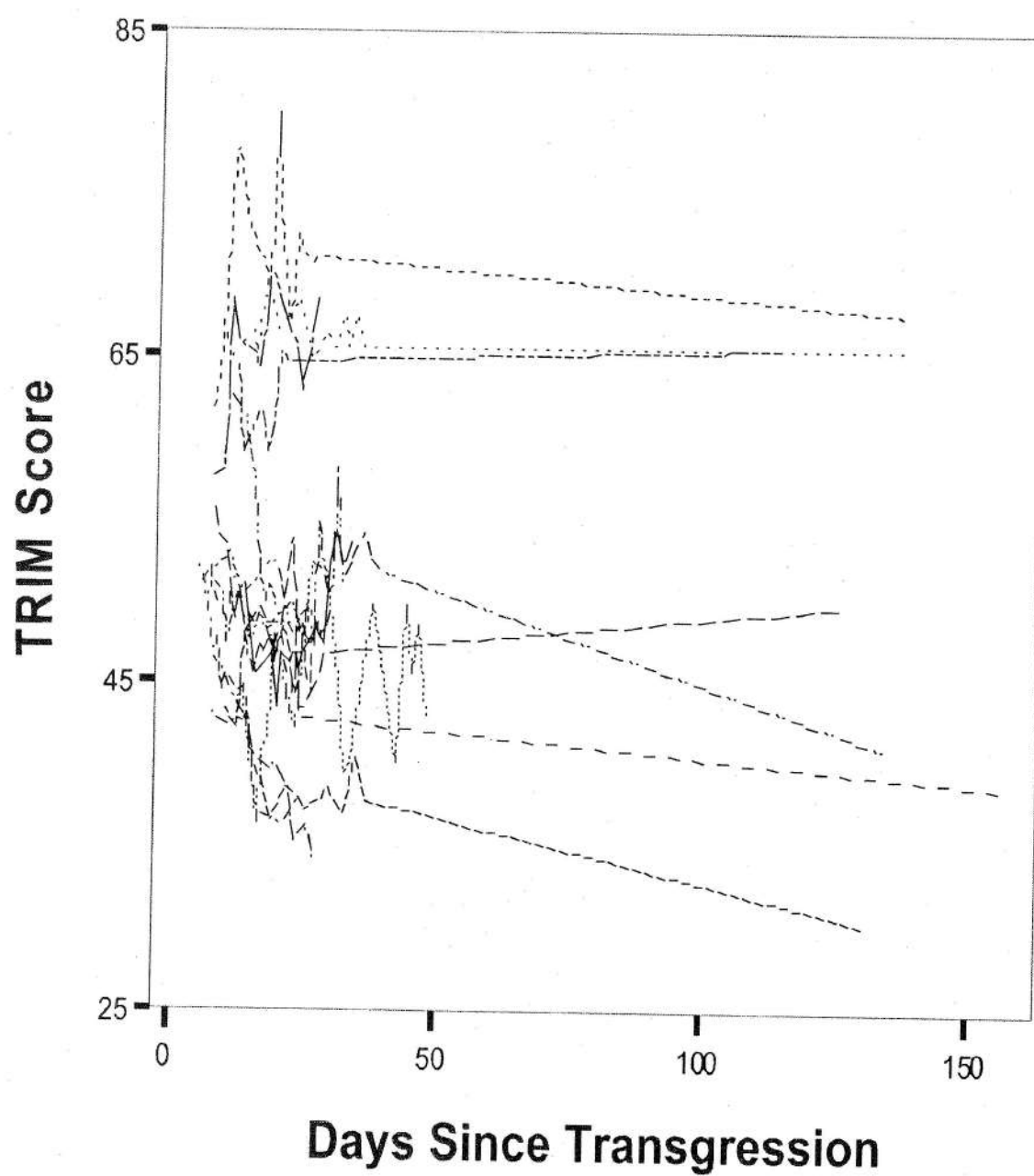


Figure 4. Trajectory plots for 15 randomly selected cases (Study 2).
From McCullough, Root-Lane, Berry, Tabak, & Ramey (2010)

Exposure Theory

- The natural course is that so many external and internal events happen, unforgiving emotion and vengeful motives decline. (Emotional interference)

Battles

- If **System 1 rumination** can keep the hurts fresh, that can keep natural fading from happening, and could even make unforgiveness increase.

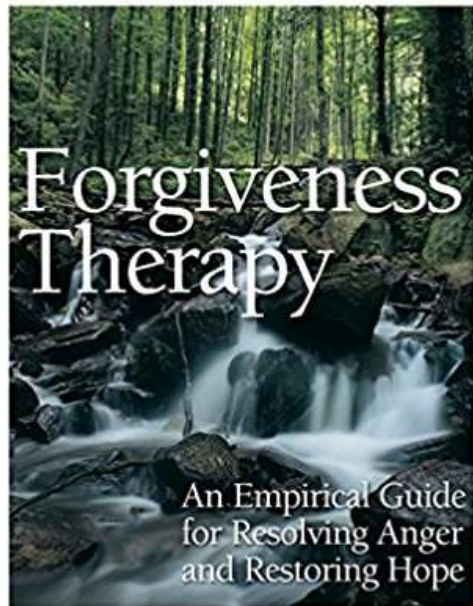
Exposure Theory: Possible Reasons Why Exposure → Forgiveness

- **Deconditioned** to stress-reactions or **fatigue** the stress-reaction
- **Attentional focus** on forgiving permits cognitive activities that foster forgiveness to occur.
- Time for other **competing** psychological, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral **experiences** that affect their coping with unforgiveness.
- **Response prevention**—think about the offender while preventing avoidance of thinking and also preventing acting on vengeful cognition.
- Instigate **explicit cognition** about reducing unforgiveness and their prefrontal cortex activation can **potentiate emotional regulation**.
- **Fear conditioning**—create new structures compete w/ unforgiving structure.
- **System 1 coping** is also occurring (out of awareness for the most part), which allows natural fading to occur. Interventions focus attention broadly on coping. Each emphasizes particular cognition, emotional experiences, etc. But the person is drawing on a lifetime of coping and emotion-regulation

Intervention Models



Enright's Process Theory of Intervention (Not a theory of naturally occurring forgiveness)



Robert D. Enright and Richard P. Fitzgibbons

FORGIVENESS IS A CHOICE

*A Step-by-Step Process for
Resolving Anger and
Restoring Hope*

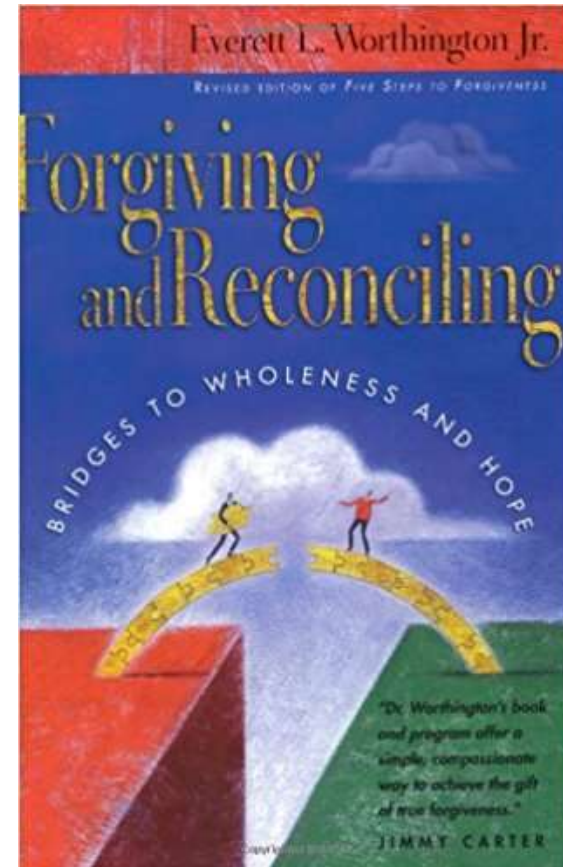
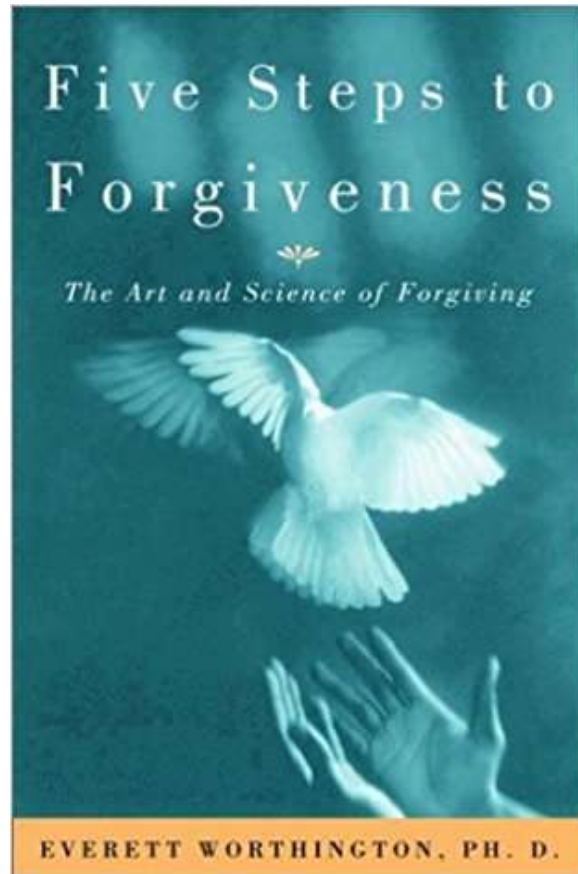
Robert Enright is
"the forgiveness trailblazer."
—Time Magazine

ROBERT D. ENRIGHT, PhD

Enright's Process Theory of Intervention

- Uncovering: gains an understanding of the offense and the consequence of the injury to the one's life.
- Decision: learns about forgiveness and makes a decision to commit to forgiving; forgiveness is choice.
- Work: seek empathic understanding to reframe the offense and offender.
- Deepening: discover some sense of meaning or ultimate purpose in suffering and feel more connected with others.

Worthington's 5 Steps to REACH Emotional Forgiveness (Not a theory of naturally occurring forgiveness)



5 Steps to REACH Emotional Forgiveness

R=Recall the Hurt

E=Empathize (Sympathize, feel Compassion for, Love) the Transgressor

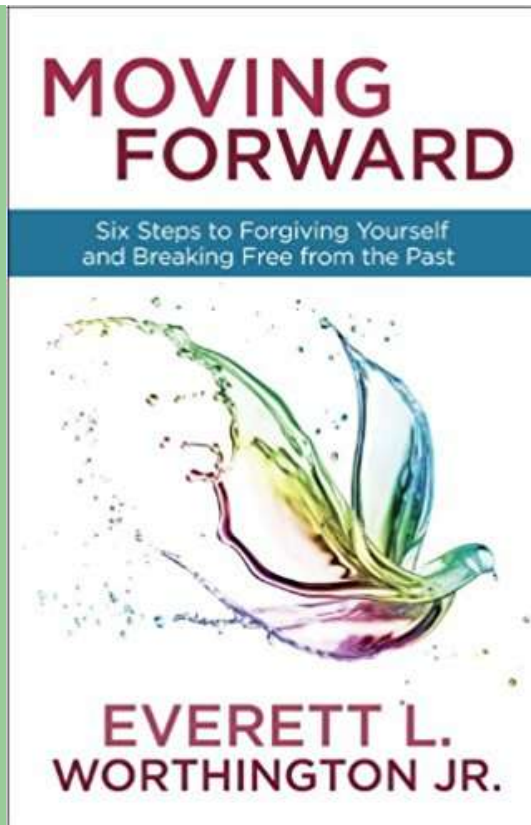
A=give an Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness

C=Commit to the Emotional Forgiveness One Experienced

H=Hold on to Forgiveness When Doubts Arise

Want more about how to do it?
www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com, which includes manuals and downloadable training videos.

Worthington and Griffin's Dual-Process Theory of Self-Forgiveness (Not a theory of naturally occurring forgiveness)



Dual Process Model of Self-Forgiveness: Six Steps to Self-Forgiveness and Decisional Plus Emotional Self-Forgiveness

- Responsibility
 - Step 1: Receive God's Forgiveness (or Humanity, or Nature)—Moral repair (Decisional)
 - Step 2: Repair Relationships—Moral repair (Decisional)
 - Step 3: Reduce Rumination (Rumination, Expectations, Standards)—Internal condemnation (Emotional)
- REACH Emotional Self-Forgiveness
 - Step 4: Explicit Decision plus REACH Emotional Self-forgiveness)—Moral Repair (Decisional) plus Internal condemnation (Emotional)
- Repair of Self
 - Step 5: Realize Self-Acceptance—Internal condemnation (Emotional)
 - Step 6: Resolve to Live Virtuously—Moral Repair (Decisional)

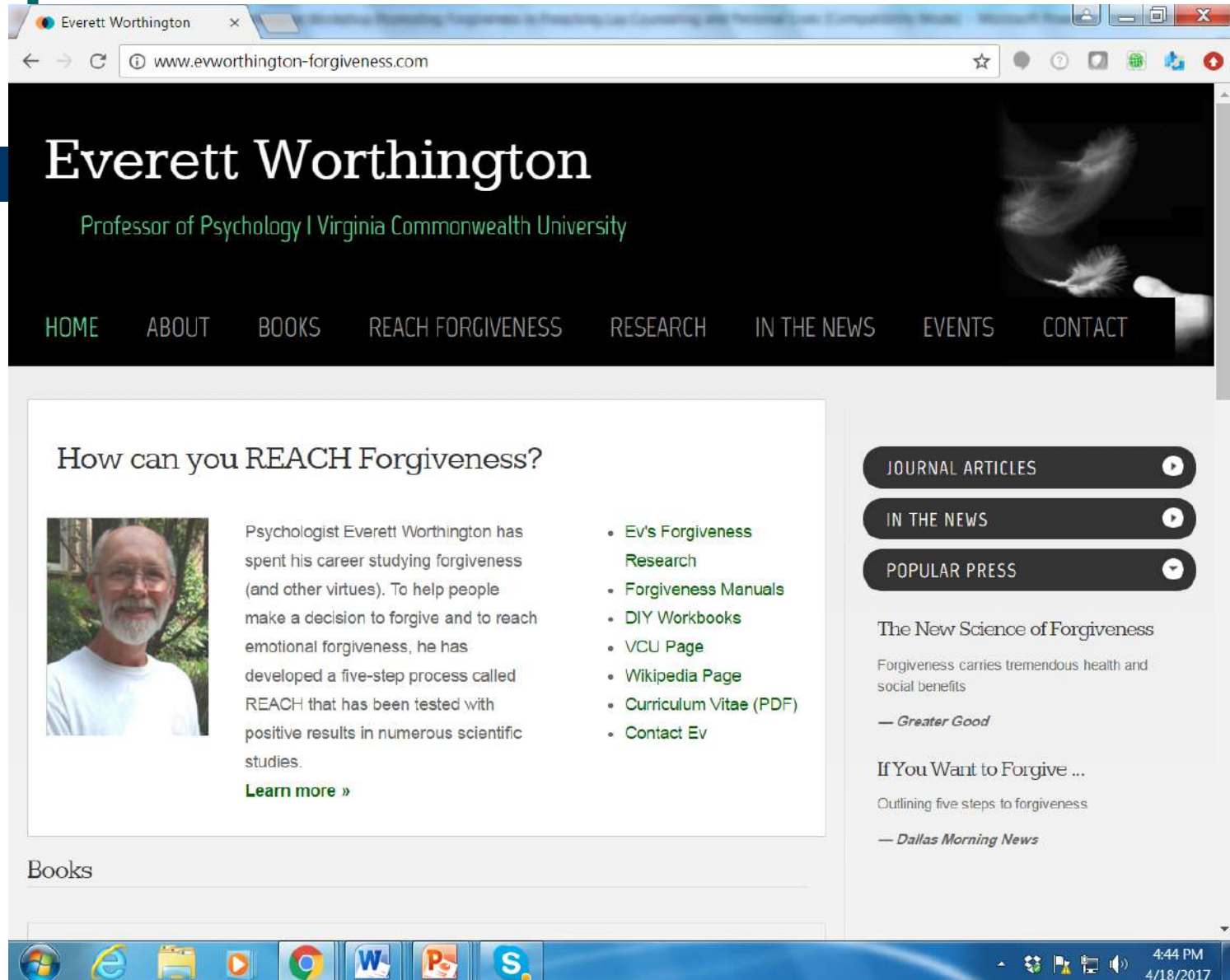
Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2013). ***Moving Forward: Six Steps to Self-Forgiveness and Breaking Free from the Past.*** Colorado Springs: WaterBrook/Multnomah.



Griffin, B. J., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Lavelock, C. R., Greer, C. L., Lin, J., Davis, D. E., & Hook, J. N. (2015). Efficacy of a self-forgiveness workbook: A randomized controlled trial with interpersonal offenders. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 124-136.

Davis, D. E., Ho, M. Y., Griffin, B. J., Bell, C., Hook, J. N., Van Tongeren, D. R., Worthington, E. L., Jr., DeBlaere, C., & Westbrook, C. (2015). Forgiving the self and physical and mental health correlates: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 62(2), 329-335.

Make Materials Available and Free— Group Manuals and Workbooks Are Free


A screenshot of a web browser displaying the website of Everett Worthington. The browser's address bar shows the URL www.eworthington-forgiveness.com. The website has a dark header with the name 'Everett Worthington' in white, followed by 'Professor of Psychology | Virginia Commonwealth University' in green. A navigation menu below the header includes links for HOME, ABOUT, BOOKS, REACH FORGIVENESS, RESEARCH, IN THE NEWS, EVENTS, and CONTACT. The main content area features a section titled 'How can you REACH Forgiveness?' which includes a portrait of Everett Worthington, a paragraph about his work, and a list of links. To the right of this section are three buttons for 'JOURNAL ARTICLES', 'IN THE NEWS', and 'POPULAR PRESS'. Below these buttons are two featured articles: 'The New Science of Forgiveness' and 'If You Want to Forgeve ...'. At the bottom left, there is a 'Books' section. The Windows taskbar at the bottom of the screen shows various application icons and the system clock indicating 4:44 PM on 4/18/2017.

Everett Worthington

Professor of Psychology | Virginia Commonwealth University

HOME ABOUT BOOKS REACH FORGIVENESS RESEARCH IN THE NEWS EVENTS CONTACT

How can you REACH Forgiveness?



Psychologist Everett Worthington has spent his career studying forgiveness (and other virtues). To help people make a decision to forgive and to reach emotional forgiveness, he has developed a five-step process called REACH that has been tested with positive results in numerous scientific studies.

[Learn more »](#)

- [Ev's Forgiveness Research](#)
- [Forgiveness Manuals](#)
- [DIY Workbooks](#)
- [VCU Page](#)
- [Wikipedia Page](#)
- [Curriculum Vitae \(PDF\)](#)
- [Contact Ev](#)

JOURNAL ARTICLES

IN THE NEWS

POPULAR PRESS

The New Science of Forgiveness

Forgiveness carries tremendous health and social benefits

— *Greater Good*

If You Want to Forgeve ...

Outlining five steps to forgiveness

— *Dallas Morning News*

Books

There are many more interventions that have been studied in multiple outcome studies



- Luskin: Forgive for Good (CBT)
- Les Greenberg: Empty-Chair dialogues (Emotionally Focused Therapy)
- Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder: Forgiveness after infidelity (CBT + Psychoanalytic Relational)
- Rye: cognitively oriented groups
- Wade: Process groups
- Many Others

Summary

- There are many psychological theories of person-to-person forgiveness, and *they share much in common*.
- A few things: empathy, interpersonal context conditions forgiveness, forgiveness is internal, forgiveness is not isolated but is related to other intra-personal and inter-personal processes.
- People can be helped to forgive faster with interventions, but those do not mirror naturally occurring forgiveness

Questions and Answers

