Forgive Well

What the Research Says About Forgiveness, Anger, Hurt and Letting Go

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Do Forgiveness Programmes Work?

Forgiveness is often treated as a matter of character. Researchers have tested it as a skill that can be taught. This chapter starts with the largest pooled analysis of programmes built to help people forgive. It is general education, not therapy.

WHAT THEY DID

The authors pooled results from 54 published and unpublished reports of professionally led treatments designed to help people forgive a specific hurt. A meta-analysis combines studies into one estimate. They used 53 effect sizes measured right after treatment (2,323 people) and 41 measured later at follow-up (1,716 people) (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell and Worthington, 2014).

WHAT THEY FOUND

People who received a forgiveness treatment reported significantly more forgiveness than people who received no treatment (average effect 0.56; 95 percent interval 0.43 to 0.68) and than people who received a different treatment (0.45; interval 0.21 to 0.69). Forgiveness treatments also produced greater changes in depression, anxiety and hope than no treatment. Longer programmes and individual sessions, compared with group sessions, predicted bigger gains in forgiveness against no-treatment controls. The authors say that using forgiveness programmes with a sound theory behind them is a sound choice for helping people deal with past offences.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Forgiveness can be taught, and taught programmes beat doing nothing. The gain was medium in size, not a cure.

LIMITS

The people studied had received professional treatment, so the results may not apply to forgiving on your own. The abstract does not say which hurts were involved or how long the gains lasted. Offence severity and programme type changed the results. This is general education, not therapy.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the analysis.

Name the specific hurt you want to work on, not hurt in general.

Give it time: longer programmes did better than short ones.

If a hurt is very painful, think about working with a trained counsellor.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A woman picks one specific broken promise from a friend and writes down the date and what happened. She decides to work on that one event for six weeks. It is her own plan, not a study result.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Write one sentence naming a single hurt you would like to work on.

KEY POINTS

A meta-analysis of 54 reports found forgiveness treatments raised forgiveness more than no treatment (0.56) and more than other treatments (0.45), with longer programmes and individual sessions doing better.

Chapter 2: Forgiveness, Anger and Mental Wellbeing

Chapter 1 asked whether people forgive more after a programme. This chapter asks what else changes. A review pooled only randomised trials, the strongest kind of test. This chapter is general education, not therapy.

WHAT THEY DID

The authors reviewed randomised trials of forgiveness interventions that followed a process, with teenagers and adults who had been hurt, abused or had suffered violence or trauma. They checked each study for risk of bias and used standardised mean differences, a standard way to express how far apart two groups' results are (Akhtar and Barlow, 2018).

WHAT THEY FOUND

The interventions reduced depression (standardised difference 0.37; 95 percent interval 0.07 to 0.68), anger and hostility (0.49; interval 0.22 to 0.77), and stress and distress (0.66; interval 0.41 to 0.91), and increased positive feeling (0.29; interval 0.06 to 0.52). The abstract writes these differences with minus signs; the sizes here are given without them. State forgiveness, meaning forgiving one particular offence, rose (0.55; interval 0.21 to 0.88), and so did trait forgiveness, a general readiness to forgive (0.43; interval 0.20 to 0.67). The authors say the evidence is moderately strong that forgiving a range of real-life offences can improve mental wellbeing, and that more research is needed.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

The biggest change was in stress and distress, then anger, then depression. Forgiveness work seems to help how people feel, not only how they think about the other person.

LIMITS

The abstract does not give the number of trials or participants. It covers people who had suffered serious hurts, which are not the same as everyday slights. The authors call for more research. This is general education, not therapy.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Notice how your body feels when you think of the hurt, and write down a number from 1 to 10.

Measure again after a month of practice.

Talk to a doctor or counsellor if the hurt is linked to abuse, violence or trauma.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A man rates his stress from 1 to 10 whenever he thinks about a falling-out with his brother. His average is 7 in week one and 5 in week six. It is his own record, not a study result.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Rate how upset you feel about one past hurt from 1 to 10 and write the date.

KEY POINTS

A review of randomised trials found forgiveness interventions reduced stress and distress (0.66), anger and hostility (0.49) and depression (0.37) and raised positive feeling (0.29).

Chapter 3: A Six-Week Group for People Still Hurting

Chapters 1 and 2 pooled many studies. This chapter looks closely at one large randomised trial of a short group programme. It is general education, not therapy.

WHAT THEY DID

The authors recruited 259 adults who had experienced a hurtful wrong from another person and still felt its effects. They randomly assigned them to a six-week forgiveness training programme or to a no-treatment control group. They measured forgiveness of that specific offence, how likely people were to forgive in new situations, and health-related measures such as perceived stress and trait anger (Harris, Luskin, Norman, Standard, Bruning, Evans and Thoresen, 2006).

WHAT THEY FOUND

The programme reduced negative thoughts and feelings about the offence two to three times more than the control condition, and produced significantly greater increases in positive thoughts and feelings toward the person who hurt them. There were also significant effects on forgiveness self-efficacy, which is confidence in being able to forgive, forgiveness in new situations, perceived stress and trait anger.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

A short group course changed both how people felt about one hurt and how stressed and angry they were in general.

LIMITS

The abstract gives no effect sizes beyond "two to three times", and it does not say how long the changes lasted. The control group received nothing, so the study cannot say what part of the programme did the work. This is general education, not therapy.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the trial.

Write what happened in two sentences, as plainly as you can.

Write one positive thing you can honestly say about yourself or the situation now.

Do this weekly for six weeks.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A man writes weekly notes about a business partner who let him down. In week one the notes are all anger. By week six they include a line about what he learned. It is his own record, not a study result.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Write one thing you honestly learned from a past hurt.

KEY POINTS

A trial of 259 adults found a six-week forgiveness group reduced negative thoughts and feelings about a hurt two to three times more than no treatment, and lowered perceived stress and trait anger.

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