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### Understanding Forgiveness During College: A Phenomenological Study

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UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS DURING COLLEGE:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Ethan McNeil

May 2022

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Ethan James McNeil

entitled

Understanding Forgiveness During College:  
A Phenomenological Study

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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### **Abstract**

College students see their understanding of many different topics and ideas change during their time in college. One such topic is forgiveness. This phenomenological study looks to gauge an understanding of how students' understanding of forgiveness changes during college at a small, private, Christian, liberal arts institution located in the rural Midwest. The results of the study showed that students' understanding deepens, even if they still struggle to practice different aspects of forgiveness. The discussion explains the results of the study and introduces opportunities for educators to engage students about forgiveness, teaching and mentoring them as their understanding grows and deepens.

## Acknowledgments

I could write a couple of paragraphs expressing my thanks and gratitude to the number of people who helped me during this process, all of which is true. However, in choosing to stick with my personality, here are some funny statements for some of the people who helped in the past few years:

Mom, Dad, Brother, Sister, Brother, Dog, and Dog. Family. Thanks :)

MAHE and Cohort XIV, a family I never knew I needed. Full of enthusiasm. I will see you at Applebee's!

To the B-Rick Boys (and Moxie!) for keeping the Christmas Spirit alive well into March. I will never forget how my table was once brown.

TU XFit: if you are reading this, Chris P for time. Three... two... one... GO!

TUMS, remember, it always comes back to Marxism, even soccer.

TRU, a true Band of Brothers who made a serious statement down in Nawlins.

Swallow Robin, I don't mention my undergrad residence hall in this, so this clearly means something, right?

To the ELHOA and the ELYC, live every day like Martinez, and all is good. I stand with King Julian! #Watermelon

Shout out to Dr. Chae, Central Indiana Orthopedics, and Frank for the new ACL.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“We’re at the mercy of each other and ourselves.*

*That’s why there has to be forgiveness on both sides.”*

Abed Nadir (Shapeero, 2010)

College students fail often, and they are especially susceptible to making mistakes in all aspects of college life such as academics, interpersonal relationships, and economics. In all these situations is an opportunity for students to engage in forgiveness, whether with themselves or others. The idea of forgiveness is something one encounters across the span of their life, but the college years are a formative time for understanding its impact.

Forgiveness goes against the natural grain of human instinct. When someone wrongs someone else, the natural instinct is resentment and bitterness. Enright (1996) defines forgiveness as “willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, or fostering undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love towards him or her who wronged you” (p. 113). Forgiveness has several levels.

These levels of forgiveness extend to both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Forgiveness is a complicated idea one can extend to both others and oneself. Forgiveness to others and receiving forgiveness go together. Most often, it takes two people to forgive. However, while the most common understanding of forgiveness is

forgiving others, forgiving oneself is a common interaction people have almost daily. Enright (1996) summarizes all these aspects of forgiveness using the forgiveness triad, which boils down into three distinct pieces: forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, and receiving forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness of Others**

Forgiving others is the most common understanding of forgiveness. It is the ability to recognize incidents that cause resentment, bitterness, or hurt towards themselves and to be able to forego negative reactions and emotions towards those who wronged them. Webb et al. (2012) note how the “Negative emotions associated with an offense, including anger, are not denied or viewed as unjustified or illegitimate; rather, individuals are encouraged to identify and process such emotions and willfully pursue forgiveness” (p. 40). In other words, it is perfectly acceptable to feel negative emotions towards people who have caused harm or wrongdoing. Despite an apparent injustice, the victim chooses to move past the pain and hurt and extend grace to the person who wronged them.

### **Forgiveness of Self**

It is important to note that self-forgiveness is more complicated than forgiving others because the person who caused the unjust injury is the person who was injured. Self-forgiveness is the most difficult to achieve (Webb et al., 2012). Self-forgiveness is a complicated process that involves separating oneself from one’s mistakes (Webb et al., 2012). Being able to let go of the negative emotions like guilt, shame, or failure associated with one’s mistakes is very difficult. The struggles come from the fact that

people harshly criticize themselves and hold themselves to a higher standard. Failure or mistakes oppose this standard for oneself (Webb et al., 2012, p. 40).

### **Receiving Forgiveness**

One of the most complex aspects of forgiving others and forgiving oneself is receiving forgiveness. Both the offender and the offended can initiate the forgiveness process. In both cases, both sides need to be willing to forgive. The initiator is open to the idea by offering forgiveness to the other. However, the other party needs to be willing and ready to receive forgiveness for the process to take place. “When one offends another, he or she receives forgiveness when the offended person willingly offers the cessation of negative attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, and substitutes more positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the offender” (Enright, 1996). With both the forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness, the offended must accept forgiveness from the offender.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Forgiveness is a deeply spiritual and religious idea, but a significant amount of research on forgiveness exists (Enright, 1996; Onal & Yalcin, 2017; Webb, 2012; Worthington, 1998). Research also looks at the detrimental effects not engaging in forgiveness has on someone’s mental and physical health (Enright, 1996; Hirsch et al., 2011; Lampton et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2012). Research about the role of forgiveness in higher education, and more specifically Christian higher education, points to the importance forgiveness plays in students’ development (Lampton et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2012; Worthington, 1998). A college campus provides a rich environment for studying forgiveness. Students living in a community with others means there are bound

to be injustices and hurt caused by someone, thus creating a high potential for engaging in some aspect of forgiveness.

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of how students' understanding of forgiveness changes through their college experience. With so many opportunities for growth regarding forgiveness available to students on a college campus, knowing how students understand forgiveness can help educators better engage and teach their students. Recognizing how students engage with forgiveness can also help educators equip students when they go through challenging times. Thus, the following research question guided this study: How does students' understanding of forgiveness change throughout their college experience?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This study aims to determine how the college experience impacts how students understand forgiveness. The following review of the literature on forgiveness creates a foundational understanding of forgiveness and helps show the importance and relevance of forgiveness in higher education.

#### **Forgiveness**

Enright (1996) defines forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” (p.113). Whether intentional or not, an accident or a mistake, anger and bitterness are seemingly natural responses to being wronged. In contrast, forgiveness is the act of forgoing negative emotions and indifference, choosing instead to show grace and hospitality.

Forgiveness does not imply that the wronged or injured person will not feel negative emotions. Webb et al. (2012) note how the “Negative emotions associated with an offense, including anger, are not denied or viewed as unjustified or illegitimate; rather, individuals are encouraged to identify and process such emotions and willfully pursue forgiveness” (p. 40). In other words, it is perfectly normal to feel negative emotions toward people who caused harm or wrongdoing. However, when someone chooses to forgive, that person is acting despite these thoughts and feelings.

For forgiveness to happen, three characteristics must be present in the parties involved: empathy, humility, and commitment (Worthington, 1998, p. 62). Worthington (1998) argues empathy is the most important. Understanding what the offended is feeling helps the offender connect with the person or persons they harmed. Without such an understanding, the offender might never realize the harm they caused someone. The offender then must humble themselves and commit to the idea of pursuing forgiveness from those they have wronged (Worthington, 1998, p. 63).

While empathy, humility, and commitment are vital to a person being willing and able to engage in the act of forgiveness, rumination is a factor that can prevent forgiveness from happening (Onal & Yalcin, 2017, p. 100). Rumination is the act of thinking deeply about something. In relation to forgiveness, ruminating on one's actions can impact how the offender feels about and understands the offense they committed.

Rumination is a process that can not only make it harder for an individual to forgive others but also can prevent self-forgiveness. Rumination is considered to be an effective factor in the continuation of negative feelings and thoughts towards one's self regarding a transgression that he or she has done. (Onal & Yalcin, 2017, p. 100)

Spending significant amounts of time considering offenses that take place can be harmful to the individual thinking about them. More time spent ruminating on an issue causes the individual to feel less remorse and guilt about the issue (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2010).

### ***Forgiveness Versus Reconciliation***

There is a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation; they are not mutually exclusive. Reconciliation is the act of reconciling, which means "to restore to

friendship or harmony” (Merriam-Webster). Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Unlike reconciliation, forgiveness does not constitute a relationship continuing. “When people forgive, they offer a positive stance toward one who is undeserving because of the offense. They need not join into a previous relationship” (Enright, 1996).

While forgiveness does require someone to forgo their negative emotions or frustrations with another person, there is no requirement to maintain an active relationship with said person or indulge the offending behavior. Enright (1996) uses the example of someone hurt by a family member’s gambling addiction. While that individual may forgive the offender’s actions, they will not lend money to that person. While they have no hard feelings towards the individual, the offended individual does not engage with the offense.

### ***Forgiveness Triad***

Most of the research on forgiveness focuses on forgiving others. However, Enright (1996) argues that forgiveness is a much larger process. There are also two additional components of forgiveness: forgiveness for oneself and one’s ability to receive forgiveness from others (Enright, 1996). In conjunction with one another, these three aspects of forgiveness form the forgiveness triad.

The common understanding of forgiveness is that it is something that one person gives to someone else. However, there are more people involved. Forgiveness is a process of giving and receiving. Typically, the offender extends forgiveness to the offended (Enright, 1998). While the offender might be ready to offer forgiveness, the offended party may not be prepared to accept the apology. Interpersonal forgiveness requires both parties to be willing and ready to forgive (Enright, 1998). Self-forgiveness



requires a person to be both willing to forgive and receive forgiveness. All aspects of the forgiveness triad interact with one another and are essential in the forgiveness process (Enright, 1998).

**Forgiveness of Others.** Forgiveness of others is arguably the most easily recognized form of forgiveness. However, despite being the most common example, there is still plenty that must happen for the process of forgiveness to take place. According to Enright (1996), forgiveness of others typically needs four significant components of forgiveness for it to occur:

1. The offended person has suffered an unjust, perhaps deep hurt from another or others.
2. The offended person willingly chooses to forgive. The act is volitional, not grimly obligatory.
3. The offended person's new stance includes affect (overcoming resentment and substituting compassion), cognition (overcoming thoughts of condemnation with thoughts of respect), and behavior (overcoming a tendency toward acts of revenge with acts of goodwill).
4. Forgiving is primarily one person's response to the other.

In other words, an offense needs to occur. The offended person chooses to move from bitterness to empathy, change how they think about the offender, and change how they act with the offender. While more than two people can be offended by one offence, there no such thing as blanket forgiveness. Everyone involved must choose to forgive separately. Although forgiveness of others can occur without these components, when

some or all of them are present, the process is more likely to happen and happen smoothly.

However, the forgiveness of others is “a more complex process that may rely on contextual factors that influence a person’s ability to forgive another, such as the nature of the transgression, or the quality of the relationship before the offense” (Gismero-González et al., 2020, p. 76). Variables such as personality, attributions, social identity, and worldview can all impact someone’s ability to forgive (McLernon et al., 2004, p. 596). No offense is totally unforgivable, but depending on the harm of any given offense, it can be more challenging for forgiveness to take place.

As noted earlier, for forgiveness at any level to occur, the characteristics of empathy, humility, and commitment must be present (Worthington, 1998, p. 62). When considering the forgiveness of others, several other traits also need to be present. One of these traits is vulnerability. Each party must be willing to be open and honest about past failures, hurts, and offenses. Forgiveness of others also requires respect between the parties involved (Enright, 1996). Without respect, neither party will be able to approach one another to begin the forgiveness process.

**Forgiveness of Self.** It is important to note that self-forgiveness can be more complicated than forgiving others because the person who caused the unjust injury is the person who was injured. Webb (2012) notes how self-forgiveness is the most difficult to achieve. A study conducted by Macaskill et al. (2002) notes how “empathy is positively correlated with forgiveness of others, but not with forgiveness of self” (p. 665). Self-forgiveness is a complicated process that involves separating oneself from one’s mistakes (Webb et al., 2012, p. 40).

Empathy is being able to understand or relate to the feelings and emotions of someone else. Empathy for oneself is difficult to achieve. It requires someone to compartmentalize and understand their emotions and feelings well (Sherman, 2014, pp. 230–231). The feelings most often related to self-forgiveness—guilt and shame—directly link to mistakes or regrets making it challenging to empathize with personally. Self-empathy requires someone to be able to see outside of one’s present circumstances and look internally simultaneously. “As in interpersonal forgiveness, a self-forgiver has a right to self-resentment for the specific behavior(s) leading to self-offense, but he or she gives up the resentment nonetheless” (Enright, 1996).

Being able to let go of negative emotions such as guilt, shame, or failure associated with one’s mistakes is very difficult. The struggles come from the fact that people harshly criticize themselves. “Self-criticism can take two different forms, the hated self and the inadequate self. The former is characterized by feelings of disgust, contempt, and hatred for the self, whereas the latter is characterized by feelings of inadequacy and inferiority” (Barcaccia et al., 2020, p. 463). People often hold themselves to a higher standard than they might maintain toward others. Failure or mistakes oppose this standard for oneself (Webb et al., 2012, p. 40).

The effects of guilt and shame, connected to a lack of self-forgiveness from a person, can affect many different aspects of a person’s life. “The relationship between (un)forgiveness and health is thought to operate in association with distinct mediating variables, such as interpersonal functioning, social support, health behavior, and mental health” (Webb et al., 2012, p. 40). An inability to forgive oneself can have detrimental effects on someone’s health.

The effects of not being able to forgive oneself can manifest in many ways. It can cause someone to develop a negative self-image. It can also increase the amount of anger or bitterness in a person's life. Webb et al. (2012) that living in a state of "(un)forgiveness" can lead to an increase in aggression (p. 42). Hirsch et al. (2011) note that not forgiving oneself can increase anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies. Increased aggressive behavior can lead to more negative thoughts toward oneself, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In other words, an individual being unable to forgive him or herself for mistakes or failures can increase mental health issues.

**Receiving Forgiveness.** Receiving forgiveness is often difficult because it is often the reverse of the normal process of forgiveness. "When one offends another, he or she receives forgiveness when the offended person willingly offers the cessation of negative attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, and substitutes more positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the offender" (Enright, 1996). Unlike forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self, receiving forgiveness typically turns the tables from the offended to the offender. The offender receiving forgiveness from the person the offender hurt is an act of humility and admitting wrong. Not only is the offender acknowledging the harm caused, but also admitting guilt in the offense.

However, while the offended might offer forgiveness to the offender, nothing requires the offender to receive the forgiveness. The offender must also come to a point where they are ready to engage in forgiveness. Enright (1996) notes how:

When genuine-active forgiveness is received, the offender is not engineering the other's forgiveness, nor is the offender a passive recipient of that forgiveness.

Rather, he or she is willing to welcome that forgiveness, may actively ask for it, and is willing to wait until it is given.

In some cases, the offender can be the initiator of forgiveness, but that does not mean the offended needs to be willing to forgive. The offender might recognize the harm he or she caused to someone else, but the person they harmed may not be ready to forgive.

However, the offender is willing to wait and receive forgiveness should it ever be offered from the offended (Enright, 1996).

### **Forgiveness and Mental Health**

According to Batik et al. (2017), choosing to forgo negative emotions and actions and, instead, looking to forgive can lead to various positive benefits (p. 157). Instead of being held down by feelings of guilt and shame, individuals who choose to forgive can experience increased happiness (Batik et al., 2017). However, not practicing forgiveness can cause problems, including increasing stress on mental health. “Thoughts and feelings of self-criticism and self-condemnation are significantly correlated to psychopathology, particularly depression, and even suicidal ideation” (Barcaccia et al., 2020, p. 463). A lack of forgiveness for oneself is a factor that contributes to poor mental health. Being unable to get past the feelings of guilt and shame that accompany mistakes and failure can result in anxious thoughts and feelings of doubt in a person (Enright, 1996).

### **Forgiveness in Higher Education**

A college campus can be an incredibly stressful environment. Not only do students deal with the rigors of college academia, but they also balance that with other aspects of their college experience, like their social life and extracurricular activities (Oman et al., 2008, p. 569). “People do not live perfect lives, and if any spirit of

judgment or condemnation is present among students, it will manifest itself within the student body” (Lampton et al., 2005, p. 279). Being aware of the adverse effects on an individual’s mental health can benefit those working in higher education.

College students face many stressors in their day-to-day life. Their mistakes and failures can cause guilt and shame, which manifest as feelings of anxiety or depression. The Mayo Clinic notes that roughly 33% of all college students experience some form of mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Druckenmiller, 2022). Suicidal behavior is typically a byproduct of other mental health afflictions, like depression (Hirsch et al., 2011, p. 897). According to Hirsch et al. (2011), approximately 1100 college students die by suicide yearly.

Forgiveness is not the sole factor leading to increased mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and suicide. However, a study conducted by Hirsch et al. (2011) “found that the relationship between forgiveness of self and suicidal behavior was mediated by depressive symptoms, such that greater forgiveness was associated with less depression and, consequently, less suicidal behavior” (p. 901). Multiple studies promote higher education institutions’ ability to foster forgiveness attitudes that can benefit many different aspects of student life on college campuses (Lampton et al., 2005; Oman et al., 2008; Walker & Gorsuch, 2004). Recognizing the benefits of forgiveness and practicing forgiveness regularly positively affects individuals’ mental health and overall well-being.

### **Forgiveness in the Christian Faith**

Forgiveness is a fundamental value of Christianity, stemming from the Old Testament idea of sacrificial atonement discussed in Levitical Law. Leviticus 16:30 says, “on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you

will be clean from all your sins” (New Living Translation Bible, 1996). Through the sacrifices the Lord cleansed, or forgave, people of their sins. Christ’s death on the cross in the New Testament removed the need for a ritual sacrifice, becoming the source of atonement. His death makes possible the forgiveness of sins for his followers.

Christ also taught extensively about the idea of forgiveness during his ministry. In Matthew 6:12, Christ teaches his followers how to pray, introducing the Lord’s Prayer. In the prayer, He instructs them to ask God to “forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us” (New Living Translation Bible, 1996). He later notes, “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (New Living Translation Bible, 1996, Matt. 6:14). Followers of Christ should look to forgiveness to mirror the forgiveness given to them by God.

Forgiveness continued to be a prominent teaching point of the Christian faith after the ascension of Christ into Heaven in both biblical and extrabiblical teachings throughout the church’s history. The apostle John speaks about forgiveness in 1 John 1:9 which says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (New Living Translation Bible, 1996). Early church fathers also note the importance of forgiveness. Gregory of Nyssa says that “If, therefore, the term ‘merciful’ is suited to God, what else does the Word invite you to become but God, since you ought to model yourself on the property of the Godhead?” (Gruslin, 2016). St. Augustine of Hippo claims that “Mercy is the eternal origin of world history as well as salvation history” (Gruslin, 2016).

A contemporary understanding of Christian forgiveness is exemplified by theologian Miroslav Volf when he notes the role God plays in forgiveness. “The difference between justice and forgiveness: To be just is to condemn the fault and, because of the fault, to condemn the doer as well. To forgive is to condemn the fault but to spare the doer. That’s what the forgiving God does” (Volf, 2005). The emphasis placed throughout the Bible on forgiveness stresses the importance of forgiveness.

The same emphasis also points to the potential for growth in those who practice it. Meek and McMinn (1997) expand on that idea by saying,

Forgiveness is much more than a religious ritual from a Christian perspective. It is a progression of healing where people are confronted with the grace and mercy of God, despite their continual failure to deserve it. They learn to proffer the same grace and mercy to others in full awareness of their own fallibility. (p. 2)

As followers of Christ develop a more Christ-like character, their understanding of the need to forgive should grow. Becoming more forgiving results in an improved outlook and more joyful demeanor.

The effect of practicing forgiveness on mental well-being creates a connection between forgiveness and mental health that is incredibly relevant to Christian higher education. Students at Christian institutions struggle with mental health problems like their non-Christian counterparts. As stated earlier, a lack of self-forgiveness is not the only factor that can increase mental health issues. However, educators who work at institutions of Christian higher education should recognize the importance of teaching students the value of forgiveness. “Christianity is the religion among the world’s religions that is most characterized by forgiveness. Part of developing a Christian



character, then, is to develop a more forgiving personality” (Lampton et al., 2005, p. 279). College offers space for students to develop and grow. Christian higher education gives students the opportunity for academic and spiritual growth and maturation (Lampton et al., 2005). Forgiveness is an essential practice in Christianity. Christian institutions should educate students about forgiveness as a spiritual practice they can implement into their personal lives.

At a nonreligious institution, forgiveness is an option for dealing with students’ mental health problems; Christian higher education should see forgiveness as a vital part of community life. The Bible compels Christians to forgive, meaning that they should experience the benefits of practicing forgiveness. Batik et al. (2017) explain how “Forgiveness leads to inner peace and calm due to involving abandoning negative thoughts and emotions. For this reason, forgiveness is expected to foster subjective happiness” (p. 157). Recognizing the adverse effects of a lack of forgiveness on an individual’s mental health is reason enough for educators in Christian higher education to teach and model forgiveness to their students to cultivate a healthy and nurturing developmental environment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, forgiveness is a rather broad topic, but there are several important benefits to engaging in forgiveness. The forgiveness triad details the extensive nature of forgiveness and how it affects many different aspects of people’s lives. Forgiveness is both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Full engagement requires a level of humility and maturity. Practicing forgiveness is beneficial to one’s overall well-being and health.

When considering higher education, there is a potential to help students develop and grow as people by encouraging them to consider the benefits and effects of forgiveness in their lives. Students experience situations surrounding forgiveness almost daily while in college. Educators can help students grow and become healthier by promoting safe engagement with the forgiveness process. These ideas are more prominent and relevant to Christian higher education because of biblical mandates to engage in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Therefore, research is needed to understand how students' understanding of forgiveness changes while in college. Learning how students' understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college could allow higher education professionals to help their students to a greater degree.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to help determine how students perceive the change in their understanding of forgiveness during their college experience. Whether conscious or unconscious, most students will interact with the subject of forgiveness during their time in college. The study consisted of a descriptive survey and interviews with participants to determine how students understand the phenomenon of forgiveness.

Creswell (2017) notes, “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). In other words, although it is an individual experience, many people share the experience at some point in their lives. In the context of this study, although each student’s experience with forgiveness in college will be different, many students will interact with and see a change in their understanding of forgiveness at some point during their college experience.

#### **Mixed-Methods**

This study used a mixed-methods approach to help determine how students’ understanding of forgiveness changes during college. A solely quantitative study could help determine, with certainty, that students interact with forgiveness and that their understanding changes but offers little in the ways of understanding the changes experienced. Only using a qualitative approach would allow exploration of the change in understanding students’ experiences. However, it would offer little to show the volume of

engagement on a college campus. Therefore, a mixed design provided concrete data to support the idea that students engage with forgiveness and explain how the understanding of forgiveness changes.

### **Context**

This study took place in a private, Christian, liberal arts institution located in the rural Midwest. The institution has approximately 1,800 students enrolled, 55% female, 45% male, with about 130 full-time instructional faculty. The university requires students to take classes on the Bible and Christian thought. The university encourages its students to live virtuous lives based on the Bible's teachings. Notably, the school has a lifestyle covenant encouraging students to forgive one another and actively engage in the reconciliation process.

### **Participants**

The researcher polled 86 junior and senior students enrolled in an upper-level Christian Biblical philosophy class concerning their levels of forgiveness using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; see Appendix A). Each participant had the opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up interview. Fourteen students expressed interest in participating in an interview. Of those students who volunteered, the researcher interviewed six of them (see Appendix B) after receiving informed consent (see Appendix C). This study utilized upperclassman students because they will have the most experience with the forgiveness of students on campus. They offer more depth than an underclassman who has spent less time interacting in the campus community. Upperclassman students are also more likely to have completed most of their required

Bible and Christian thought classes, implying greater exposure to Biblical mandates for forgiveness.

### **Procedures**

Students enrolled in sections of the upper-level Christian Biblical philosophy class during the interterm and spring terms were surveyed using the HFS. The HFS is a self-report questionnaire that “measures a person’s dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations beyond anyone’s control (e.g., a natural disaster or illness)” (Thompson et al., n.d.). The scale has 18 questions that look at three aspects of forgiveness: forgiveness of self, others, and situations. Participants answer the 18 questions on a seven-point scale ranging from “almost always false of me” to “almost always true of me.” Participants’ answers on the scale are converted into a numerical score and added together to determine a score out of 126. The HFS is broken down into three subcategories: forgiving of oneself, others, and situations; each scored out of 42. The composite score and the score of three subcategories can rank how likely someone is to be on a scale of unforgiving, likely to forgive, and forgiving.

At the end of the survey, the participants were asked if they would like to participate in further interviews regarding forgiveness. The participants responded to open-ended questions concerning their experience with forgiveness to allow them to answer naturally and be without being coerced into answering a certain way or hitting on a targeted idea (Creswell, 2017).

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After being transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts, looking for specific, recurring themes and ideas.

Coding helped to make “sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (Creswell, 2017, p. 243). Once all themes and ideas were coded, the researcher reported the data and determined how students’ understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This chapter reports the survey results and the qualitative themes from individual interviews. This study used a mixed-methods analysis approach to understand how students' understanding of forgiveness changed during their college experience. The quantitative analysis uses descriptive statistics obtained by surveying 86 students utilizing the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), which gauges the likelihood someone is forgiving. The qualitative analysis uses themes from interviewing six students—two males and four females—related to how their understanding of forgiveness changed during college.

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

The quantitative survey sought to measure the dispositional forgiveness of students. The survey results help determine that college students do interact with forgiveness in general. The data collected provide a glimpse into students' dispositions as they engage with forgiveness. Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of the survey items divided into sections by aspect. It is important to note the statistical significance of the breakdown of the three subcategories of the HFS. Forgiveness of self had a mean of 4.756, forgiveness of others was 5.083, and forgiveness of situations scored a 4.841. Forgiveness of self is the lowest of the three, implying that students are less likely to engage in forgiving themselves than another aspect of forgiveness.

**Table 1***Heartland Forgiveness Scale Survey Results*

Survey Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Forgiveness of Self</b>		
Although I feel badly at first when I mess up, over time I can give myself some slack.	4.963	1.319
I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done.	3.695	1.646
Learning from bad things that I've done helps me get over them.	5.683	1.110
It is really hard for me to accept myself once I've messed up.	4.402	1.594
With time I am understanding of myself for mistakes I've made.	5.415	1.154
I don't stop criticizing myself for negative things I've felt, thought, said, or done.	4.378	1.623
<i>Forgiveness of Self Compiled</i>	<i>4.756</i>	<i>1.003</i>
<b>Forgiveness of Others</b>		
I continue to punish a person who has done something that I think is wrong.	5.415	1.186
With time I am understanding of others for the mistakes they've made.	5.549	1.371
I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me.	5.012	1.383
Although others have hurt me in the past, I have eventually been able to see them as good people.	4.951	1.378
If others mistreat me, I continue to think badly of them.	4.293	1.527



Survey Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
When someone disappoints me, I can eventually move past it.	5.280	1.230
<i>Forgiveness of Others Compiled</i>	<i>5.083</i>	<i>0.946</i>
<b>Forgiveness of Situations</b>		
When things go wrong for reasons that can't be controlled, I get stuck in negative thoughts about it.	4.049	1.749
With time I can be understanding of bad circumstances in my life.	5.561	1.090
If I am disappointed by uncontrollable circumstances in my life, I continue to think negatively about them.	4.183	1.415
I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life.	5.573	1.267
It's really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault.	4.341	1.642
Eventually I let go of negative thoughts about bad circumstances that are beyond anyone's control.	5.341	1.219
<i>Forgiveness of Situations Compiled</i>	<i>4.841</i>	<i>0.940</i>
Total Compiled	4.894	0.695

*Note.*  $N = 82$ .

In summary, the survey results showed that participants scored at or above the average response score (four) in all but one question. The mean of responses to Question 2, “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I’ve done,” is the only question to score below four ( $M = 3.695$ ). Other notable results include:

- Q3, “Learning from bad things that I’ve done helps me get over them” ( $M = 5.683$ ,  $SD = 1.110$ ).
- Q8, “With time I am understanding of others for the mistakes they’ve made” ( $M = 5.549$ ,  $SD = 1.371$ ).
- Q13, “When things go wrong for reasons that can’t be controlled, I get stuck in negative thoughts about it” ( $M = 4.049$ ,  $SD = 1.749$ ).
- Q14, “I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life” ( $M = 5.573$ ,  $SD = 1.267$ ).
- Q17, “It’s really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren’t anybody’s fault” ( $M = 4.341$ ,  $SD = 1.642$ ).

These questions and their corresponding results show significance in that they are either well above or below the total composite mean of 4.894. When the mean is above the composite mean, the participants are more likely to agree with the corresponding statement. The significance of these results is further discussed in Chapter 5 and connected with the results of the following qualitative analysis.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative analyses of the interview questions provided additional insights into answering the guiding research question. The qualitative data allow for a greater understanding of how students gauge changes in their understanding of forgiveness over time. The quantitative data provide a general overview of the likelihood students will be forgiving but offers little to explain the changes during college. Thus, the interviews allow for more significant insights and understanding of the changes that arise during a student’s time in college. The following are the themes that emerged from the interviews:

- Struggles to forgive oneself
- Selective receiving of forgiveness
- Interpersonal over intrapersonal
- Understanding of forgiveness deepened
- Impact of faith on one's understanding of forgiveness
- Character development

### *Struggles to Forgive Oneself*

All participants were asked how their understanding of forgiveness of self changed during college. Five of the six participants noted how they struggled to forgive themselves before and during college. All five participants reported how they felt the need to give grace to themselves whether they give it themselves. Student C noted how they struggled to forgive themselves in high school when they said:

I don't think I really saw the need as much because I was definitely an avoider, and so if there was an issue with myself or with others, I would just avoid it and ignore it, rather than reflect upon it and see the need for forgiveness or like confrontation and to have a conversation.

The five participants noted how their understanding of forgiveness changed during college but to varying degrees. Some were utterly unforgiving before college but recognized the need to forgive themselves. Students reported several factors that motivated them to forgive themselves. For example, it made them feel better about themselves by giving themselves grace, and it helped them move on from difficult situations or mistakes that occurred in their lives.

### ***Selective Receiving of Forgiveness***

Four of the six participants acknowledged they were selective in receiving forgiveness. All four noted how their understanding of receiving forgiveness changed. They all commented that it was the most challenging part and saw the least change. It is often looked over in the forgiveness process. For example, Student A stated, "I don't think it's something that I think about very often unless it's a big deal if that like big situations." One participant noted that they do not feel like they receive forgiveness. Students found receiving forgiveness is often overlooked or forgotten when they engage in forgiveness. It is not an acknowledged step or seen as crucial unless the situation or the person involved is deemed important enough to receive forgiveness intentionally.

### ***Interpersonal Over Intrapersonal***

When the researcher asked students to define forgiveness, all six noted how forgiveness involved other people. However, only one of the six noted how forgiveness could be related to oneself. Student B noted how

There's a lot of consequences to not forgiving someone, and it's more like it tears you apart more than anything else to not like to hold on to bitterness like that, and so it's also more healing for you. I think it's also, in a selfish way, better for you to forgive.

With the perceived benefits of forgiving others, students did not consider the possibility of forgiving themselves. Six of the six participants noted how they more often thought of forgiveness as an interpersonal action instead of an intrapersonal activity. In other words, students are more likely to engage in forgiveness when it involves other people but less likely when it concerns themselves.

### ***Understanding of Forgiveness Deepened***

Participants were asked to explain how they perceived the change in their understanding of forgiveness after college. All six participants expressed that their understanding of forgiveness deepened during their time in college. The deepening resulted from several different experiences during college that changed their understanding of forgiveness. This is explained by Student D:

I remember in high school hearing all these things that my older friends had done at college or mistakes they had made and being like “Dude, I can’t believe you would do that kind of stuff,” and now I, having gone to college and, my thought is I understand the real world, and it’s not this little bubble, and everything is not perfect.

In other words, after college, students began to realize that things they might have condemned before college became more commonplace and relevant in their lives, allowing them a better perspective to understand the need to engage in forgiveness.

### ***Impact of Faith on One’s Understanding of Forgiveness***

Although none of the questions asked by the researcher insinuated or asked the students to speak about how their faith impacted forgiveness, all six students interviewed mentioned how their religious faith impacted their understanding of forgiveness and willingness to engage in the process. Student D noted, “I’m not that great, and God forgave me for everything I’ve done, so who am I to not forgive other people.” Christians see forgiveness as an integral part of their belief and feel they need to forgive others by emulating forgiveness from God. The students noted that their faith impacted their decisions to engage in forgiveness. They also noted how their understanding of

forgiveness deepened as they got older, gained more experience, and learned more about their faith.

### ***Character Development***

All six participants noted how they saw the development of several character traits as a central part of their forgiveness development. Several factors impact their understanding of forgiveness, including characteristics such as a greater empathy for those around them and themselves; the ability to humble themselves, regardless of which side of the offense they are on; and commitment, whether to their faith or the person they offended. Student A noted all three:

I think that it requires acknowledgment of personal pride, and it requires asking the Lord to humble you and to actually be willing to like accept that humility to forgive because I think it's really easy just to sit in the like "I'm right and you're wrong" or "I can justify things." I think, like, college has taught me a lot of it is that I will self-justify for a lot of things in my life and like and that would be like related into forgiveness and so the ability to be humbled in order to forgive.

Student A's statement provides a glimpse into all three characteristics and how they relate to developing a deeper understanding of forgiveness over time from both a faith perspective and the perspective of engaging with another person.

### **Conclusion**

The guiding question for both the survey and the interviews was: How does students' understanding of forgiveness change during their college experience? The essence of the data shows that the college experience does impact a student's understanding of forgiveness. First, such a revelation stems from the survey, which found

participating students do consider forgiveness in their everyday lives. The results show students are, at a minimum, at least “likely to forgive” themselves, others, and situations.

The interviews helped gauge a change over time. From those interviews emerged the following themes: struggles to forgive oneself, selective receiving of forgiveness, interpersonal over the intrapersonal, understanding of forgiveness deepened, the impact of faith on one’s understanding of forgiveness, and character development. These results are further discussed in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

A college campus is chaotic, and the chaos can lead to the need for forgiveness on almost an everyday basis in students' lives. With so much going on, students will face many people and situations that allow them to engage in some aspect of forgiveness. The more students interact with forgiveness, the more opportunities for their understanding to be changed, for better or for worse. This study found students' understanding of forgiveness deepens during college, allowing them to become more forgiving of themselves, others, and situations. Their implementation of forgiveness, however, varies. This final chapter discusses the results, examines the implications for practice, outlines implications for future research, and discusses the benefits and limitations of the study.

### **Discussion**

Students' understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college. Students indicated that before attending college, they understood forgiveness. However, during college, students' overall understanding of forgiveness became more robust. A better understanding of forgiveness benefits students' overall mental health (Enright, 1996). A deeper understanding also helps character development in students because to engage in any aspect of forgiveness, they must also possess the characteristics of empathy, humility, and commitment (Worthington, 1998). Through the survey results and the themes that emerged from the interviews, the data from this study speak both to the level of engagement from students and to what level the understanding changes. When



considering both the survey and interviews, several connections speak to a better understanding of how students understand forgiveness.

The first theme focusing on the struggles of forgiving oneself speaks to the results of Question 2 from the survey, “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I’ve done.” Q2 was the only question from the survey on which participants scored below four, meaning that they often hold grudges against themselves, implying a struggle to forgive themselves. Studies show that forgiveness of self is difficult to achieve because it juxtaposes the feelings of guilt and shame with empathy (Sherman, 2014; Webb et al., 2012). Students indicated that while their understanding of the forgiveness of self deepened, they still struggled to forgive themselves when such situations arose. While students’ understanding of forgiveness grows, there is still room for an even more significant deepening of understanding.

Students’ struggles to engage with intrapersonal forgiveness impact how they engage with interpersonal forgiveness. However, interpersonal forgiveness sees the most growth during college. First, the data indicate that while students struggled with receiving forgiveness, students noted that it was an aspect of forgiveness they did not give the same weight before college. Thus, their overall understanding of forgiveness deepened because their knowledge of the different parts of forgiveness and what they mean shows signs of growth and development.

Second, the data indicate that students’ willingness to forgive others significantly increases during college. The survey results showed students are not unforgiving. While the survey results do not show growth in this area, the interviews revealed a more significant understanding developing during college. Students implied that while they did

engage with forgiveness before college, they felt the intent behind their forgiveness became more sincere and their motivation less selfish. Their development allowed them to understand better what forgiveness is for them and means to them, meaning their overall understanding of forgiveness deepened.

Finally, the impact of faith on the change in the understanding of forgiveness cannot be understated. A huge factor in students' forgiveness development is their faith. Forgiveness is a fundamental teaching in several world religions (Toussaint et al., 2001). The foundational document for community life at the private, faith-based liberal arts institution in which this study took place contains a section on engaging in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Therefore, even if students are not professing Christians, their college experience is deeply impacted by Christian values and teachings. The impact is even more so if they are practicing Christians. As these students learn more about their faith and its instructions, they will look at the different life situations through a Christian lens, including opportunities for forgiveness. The more they interact with these topics and conditions, the greater possibility for their understanding grows.

### **Implications for Practice**

These results hold several implications for educators in higher education when they interact with students who are engaging with the topic of forgiveness. First, educators can help students deepen their understanding through one-on-one relationships with students. There are several ways to discuss forgiveness with students. One example is bringing it up in conversation, asking them how they think about forgiveness. As

students consider and talk about forgiveness, they will begin to form a more critically thought-out definition of forgiveness for themselves.

Educators can also teach students about the forgiveness triad and the implications a more developed understanding of forgiveness holds. The forgiveness triad breaks forgiveness into three smaller portions, making it easier to understand while also revealing aspects of forgiveness students may not have considered before. Explaining and discussing the different ideas of forgiveness with individuals or groups of students helps develop a greater understanding of the topic. Allowing students the space to articulate their thoughts and feelings towards forgiveness can profoundly affect their understanding. It will enable looking at how they handled past situations and considering how they might approach future problems.

A third implication is that educators can help students in the process of learning to forgive themselves. As noted in Chapter 4, while students see a change in their understanding of forgiveness of self, they often struggle to put this aspect of forgiveness into practice. Educators can teach their students about the harmful effects of not forgiving oneself and about character traits such as commitment, empathy, and humility. Beyond that, they can encourage students to engage in forgiveness of self when appropriate. Educators can also provide support to students when they do choose to engage in the process of forgiveness of self.

Finally, educators can encourage students to consider implementing the forgiveness process when proper situations arise. As students deal with different issues in their lives, they often look for guidance from educators. With the increase in mental health issues among college students, explaining the benefits of forgiveness and how it

can alleviate some of the additional stressors in students could prove vital. Now, forgiveness is not a cure-all to mental health issues, nor should it be seen as the best solution to alleviate those kinds of problems. Still, there are numerous ways in which forgiveness can help students better their mental health and interpersonal relationships.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study reveals several areas for future research about forgiveness in higher education. Conducting similar studies at different institutions, such as public, nonreligious institutions, will likely reveal different results. This study took place at a Christian institution. Surveying students at a nonreligious institution may yield different results. The students' understanding of forgiveness will most likely deepen, but their reasoning may be less concerned with their faith. Even Christian students at a nonreligious institution might have a different perspective on forgiveness because their academics do not cover those topics in the same way.

Another implication for future research is that the study can be expanded to better gauge how students understand changes during college with more time and resources. Instead of solely surveying and interviewing students during their senior year, researchers could query students during their first year of college and then again at the end of college. By taking the survey twice, it is possible that the results would vary in a statistically significant way and speak more to understanding what changes occurred.

A third implication for future research is researchers can investigate why students' understanding of forgiveness changes. This study focused on determining how students' understanding of forgiveness changed. Future research can focus on why these changes occurred. Such studies would likely reveal several pathways to experience forgiveness

development even better. While this study adds to the body of research about forgiveness in college students, there is still much to learn and understand about students' engagement and understanding with forgiveness.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it was conducted at a small, liberal arts, faith-based institution. As mentioned in the previous section, expanding the amount and types of institutions would likely lead to a greater understanding of how forgiveness develops in students during college.

Another limitation is that the research did not use descriptive statistics based on demographics like race, class, or gender in the research process. Analyzing the data based on descriptors like these might help reveal how forgiveness is different between diverse groups. These factor into how students' understanding changes over time, and analyzing these breakdowns creates an additional direction for future research.

A third limitation is the timeframe in which the study took place. As mentioned earlier, this research only surveyed and interviewed students in their junior or senior year of college. Surveying students at the beginning of college and the end may yield a more significant data set and the ability to compare two sets of data to see how the results change over time, allowing the possibility of understanding how forgiveness develops to a greater degree.

### **Conclusion**

This study looked to answer the question: How does students' understanding of forgiveness change during their college experience? Research on forgiveness and how it interacts with higher education revealed direction for a methodology to help pursue a

better understanding of forgiveness development in students. The surveys revealed students engage with forgiveness and how likely they are to engage in the forgiveness process. The interviews provided a greater perspective on understanding how forgiveness changed during college. From those interviews, the following six themes emerged: struggles to forgive oneself, selective receiving of forgiveness, interpersonal over intrapersonal, understanding of forgiveness deepened, the impact of faith on one's understanding of forgiveness, and character development.

In conclusion, students' understanding of forgiveness significantly deepens during college. While the level will vary from student to student, all students will experience change and growth. College provides students with many circumstances that allow them to engage in forgiveness and deepen their understanding of forgiveness. Recognizing forgiveness is a process that involves oneself, others, and the act of receiving can lead to more remarkable character development and interpersonal skills, indeed leaving students "at the mercy of each other and ourselves" (Shapeero, 2010).

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## Appendix A

### Heartland Forgiveness Scale<sup>1</sup>

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Heartland Forgiveness Scale

## Heartland Forgiveness Scale

Please answer all questions thoughtfully and seriously.

\* Required

Informed  
Consent

Please read the following consent form. Once read, please type your name to confirm your consent to participate in this study.

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1d4CfCaAe5PrqO6pEjPFwCGE\\_\\_qqAlkD3JoC-uWqns/edit#settings](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1d4CfCaAe5PrqO6pEjPFwCGE__qqAlkD3JoC-uWqns/edit#settings)

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<sup>1</sup> From *Download the HFS*, by Thompson, L. Y., Snyder, C. R., & Hoffman, L., n.d. (<https://www.heartlandforgiveness.com/download-the-hfs>). In the public domain.

1. TAYLOR UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT: Assessing the change in students' understanding of forgiveness during their college experience. You are invited to participate in a research study on how students understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college. You were selected as a possible subject because of your enrollment a class where the professor agreed to allow their students to be polled We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.The study is being conducted by Ethan McNeil, graduate student (MAHE). It is not funded. STUDY PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to assess how students' understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college. NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY :If you agree to participate, you will be one of approximately 100 subjects who will be participating in the online survey PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY: If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:Participate in the following survey. This is a one-time occurrence and in total should take no more than 10 minutes. RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY: While on the study, the main risk of participating in the survey is being uncomfortable answering the questions. While filling out the survey, you can choose to end the survey at any time should you feel uncomfortable or skip a particular question. In the event of significant discomfort, free and confidential counseling services are available from your institution. BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY: There are no benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect, although you would be helping to expand the understanding of the changes in the understanding of forgiveness in college students during college. CONFIDENTIALITY: Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor (Ethan McNeil), and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), etc., who may need to access your research records. CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS: For questions about the study or a research-related injury or in the event of an emergency, contact the researcher, Ethan McNeil, at [ethan\\_mcneil@taylor.edu](mailto:ethan_mcneil@taylor.edu) or (317) 478-1314. If you are unable to reach Ethan, you may contact Jeff Aupperle at [jeffry\\_aupperle@taylor.edu](mailto:jeffry_aupperle@taylor.edu). VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY: Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or the researcher.Your participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to your consent in the following

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Heartland Forgiveness Scale

circumstances: Extreme emotional distress in order to prevent further emotional trauma.If you have any inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University’s Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of the IRB, [kris\\_johnson1@taylor.edu](mailto:kris_johnson1@taylor.edu). SUBJECT’S CONSENT: In consideration of all of the above, by typing my name, I give my consent to participate in this research study. \*

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

2. Survey instructions:

**Heartland Forgiveness Scale**

**Directions:**  
In the course of our lives negative things may occur because of our own actions, the actions of others, or circumstances beyond our control. For some time after these events, we may have negative thoughts or feelings about ourselves, others, or the situation. Think about how you **typically** respond to such negative events. Next to each of the following items write the number (from the 7-point scale below) that best describes how you **typically** respond to the type of negative situation described. There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as open as possible in your answers.

All responses will fall on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Almost Always False of Me		More Often False of Me		More Often True of Me		Almost Always True of Me

Mark only one oval.

Thanks

3. Although I feel badly at first when I mess up, over time I can give myself some slack.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Almost always false of me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Almost always true of me

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Heartland Forgiveness Scale

4. I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

5. Learning from bad things that I've done helps me get over them.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

6. It is really hard for me to accept myself once I've messed up.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

7. With time I am understanding of myself for mistakes I've made.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

11/8/21, 9:57 AM

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

8. I don't stop criticizing myself for negative things I've felt, thought, said, or done.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

9. I continue to punish a person who has done something that I think is wrong.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

10. With time I am understanding of others for the mistakes they've made.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

11. I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

11/8/21, 9:57 AM

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

12. Although others have hurt me in the past, I have eventually been able to see them as good people.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

13. If others mistreat me, I continue to think badly of them.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

14. When someone disappoints me, I can eventually move past it.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

15. When things go wrong for reasons that can't be controlled, I get stuck in negative thoughts about it.

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---



11/8/21, 9:57 AM

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

16. With time I can be understanding of bad circumstances in my life.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

17. If I am disappointed by uncontrollable circumstances in my life, I continue to think negatively about them.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

18. I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

19. It's really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault.

Mark only one oval.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

---

Almost always false of me        Almost always true of me

---

11/8/21, 9:57 AM

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

20. Eventually I let go of negative thoughts about bad circumstances that are beyond anyone's control.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Almost always false of me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Almost always true of me

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Google Forms

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Introduction**

- Go over and sign an informed consent form
- Ask the participant to define forgiveness.
- Compare participants' answers to the definition of the study.
  - “A willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, or fostering undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love towards him or her who wronged you”
- Transition into interview questions.

#### **Main Interview Questions:**

- Are you a forgiving person?
- Do you forgive others?
- Do you forgive yourself?
- Do you receive forgiveness well?
- What do you consider your main motivation to engage in forgiveness?
- Did you forgive yourself when you started college? Are you more forgiving of self now?
- How has your understanding of the forgiveness of self changed in college?
- Did you forgive others when you started college? Are you more forgiving of others now?
- How has your understanding of the forgiveness of others changed in college?
- Did you receive forgiveness well when you started college? Are you more likely to receive forgiveness now?
- How has your understanding of receiving forgiveness changed in college?
- How has your overall understanding of forgiveness changed in college?

#### **End of interview.**

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent**

Assessing the change in students' understanding of forgiveness during their college experience.

You are invited to participate in a research study on how students understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college. You were selected as a possible subject because you expressed interest in participating in follow-up interviews after participating in a survey. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Ethan McNeil, graduate student [in University program]. It is not funded.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to assess how students' understanding of forgiveness changes during their time in college.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of approximately eight to 12 subjects who will be participating in in-person interviews.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Participate in an interview with the interviewer. This is a one-time occurrence and in total should take no more than 45 minutes.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While on the study, the main risk of participating in the interview is being uncomfortable answering the questions. While conducting the interview, you can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question. In the event of significant discomfort, free and confidential counseling services are available from your institution.

#### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There are no benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect, although you would be helping to expand the understanding of changes in the understanding of forgiveness in college students during college.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Tape recordings of interviews will be destroyed following their transcription.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the [University] Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor (Ethan McNeil), and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury or in the event of an emergency, contact the researcher, Ethan McNeil, at ethan\_mcneil@taylor.edu or (317) 478-1314. If you are unable to reach Ethan, you may contact Jeff Aupperle at jeffry\_aupperle@taylor.edu.

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with [University] or the researcher.

Your participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to your consent in the following circumstances: Extreme emotional distress in order to prevent further emotional trauma.

If you have any inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to [University's] Institutional Review Board at IRB@taylor.edu or the Chair of the IRB, (**Updated IRB information**).

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this interview

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

