

# Forgiveness of an Ex-Spouse: How Does It Relate to Mental Health Following a Divorce?

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examined the relationship between forgiveness of an ex-spouse and post-divorce adjustment. Participants ( $N = 199$ ) were recruited from community singles organizations and church-based divorce recovery groups in several Midwestern cities. Forgiveness was related to several measures of mental health after controlling for the effects of demographic/background variables. Specifically, both Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) and Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) were positively correlated with Existential Well-Being. Forgiveness (Ab-

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sence of Negative) predicted Existential Well-Being beyond Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) but not vice versa. Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) was also positively correlated with Religious Well-Being and negatively correlated with Depression, State Anger, and Trait Anger. The majority of participants believed that forgiveness of one's ex-spouse is important for emotional healing following a divorce. No differences were found between Protestants and Catholics regarding perceived importance of forgiveness or self-reported forgiveness of their ex-spouse. Religious affiliation moderated the relationship between Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) and Existential Well-Being. Study implications are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Forgiveness, divorce, religiousness, mental health, post-divorce adjustment

Many divorced individuals experience negative feelings toward their ex-spouse long after the divorce has been finalized. Wallerstein (1986) interviewed individuals approximately one decade after their divorce and found that about 30% of men and 40% of women maintained feelings of anger and bitterness toward their ex-spouse. In many cases, individuals maintained these negative feelings after they remarried. It is not surprising that divorce often engenders long-lasting negative feelings because it can adversely impact many aspects of one's life. Common negative consequences of divorce include increased social isolation, lower standard of living (particularly for women), increased difficulty raising children, increased risk of health problems, and increased psychological distress (Amato, 2000). Furthermore, some divorces are precipitated by perceived wrongdoings such as infidelity, mishandling finances, substance abuse, broken promises, and verbal/physical abuse.

Experiencing anger toward an ex-spouse following a divorce is not necessarily harmful. Researchers have pointed out that anger, when appropriately expressed, may have positive benefits such as helping individuals disengage from unhealthy relationships (Davenport, 1991) and enhancing feelings of control (Novaco, 1976). However, there is also evidence that anger can become harmful. For example, research indicates that hostility is related to physical problems (Barefoot, Dahlstrom, & Williams,

1983; Siegel, 1992) and mental problems (Siegel, 1992). Furthermore, children's adjustment following a divorce is negatively correlated with level of post-divorce conflict between former spouses (Amato & Keith, 1991).

### ***FORGIVENESS AS A MEANS OF COPING WITH DIVORCE***

One strategy for coping with divorce is forgiveness. Forgiveness involves letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in response to wrongdoing and may also include responding positively toward the offender (Rye & Pargament, 2002). It is important to make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation (Freedman, 1998) because often it is not possible or desirable to reconcile with an ex-spouse. In addition, forgiveness does not involve forgetting (Smedes, 1996) or condoning the offender's behavior (Veenstra, 1992). Finally, forgiveness is not the same as legal pardon (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991) and does not compromise one's ability to pursue a fair legal settlement following a divorce.

There is evidence that forgiveness relates to improved physical health. For example, Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Lann (2001) found that unforgiving thoughts cause more physiological stress than forgiving thoughts. Sarinopoulos (2000, as cited in Luskin, 2002) found that forgiving individuals reported fewer short and long-term physical illnesses than less forgiving individuals. Furthermore, Luskin (2002) reported that a forgiveness intervention resulted in self-reported improvements in health.

Forgiveness also relates to improved mental health, such as reduced anxiety (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996), reduced anger (Luskin & Thoresen, 1997, as cited in Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998), reduced depression (Freedman & Enright, 1996), reduced grief (Coyle & Enright, 1997), increased hopefulness (Al-Mabuk *et al.*, 1995; Freedman & Enright, 1996), and increased well-being (Rye & Pargament, 2002). Furthermore, research has found that forgiveness of one's ex-spouse is negatively correlated with anxiety and positively correlated with well-being (Ashleman, 1997; Reed, 1998, as cited in Enright, 2001). Interestingly, some divorced individuals attempt to forgive by letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward their ex-spouse (Absence of Negative), while others also seek to develop a positive perspective toward their ex-spouse (Presence of Positive). An important question that has not been adequately addressed

through empirical research is whether maintaining a positive response toward an ex-spouse has benefits beyond letting go of a negative perspective.

### ***Religiousness and Forgiveness of an Ex-Spouse***

Forgiveness is strongly encouraged by many religions (see Rye et al., 2000). Researchers have found a positive relationship between religiousness and the value placed on forgiveness (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Paloma & Gallup, 1991; Rokeach, 1973; Shoemaker & Bolt, 1977). Studies have also found that intrinsic religiousness is positively correlated with forgiveness of a specific offender (e.g., Sweet, 2001; Rye et al., 2001).

Although forgiveness is central to the theologies of virtually all Christian denominations, little attention has been paid as to whether denominations differ with respect to the practice of forgiveness. This may be particularly relevant with respect to forgiveness following a divorce. While acknowledging there is considerable diversity within Protestant and Catholic traditions, some broad generalizations can be made. Both Protestants and Catholics value the sanctity of marriage and also recognize the right of individuals to divorce. However, unlike Protestant denominations, Catholics cannot be remarried within their church unless the marriage is annulled. An annulment is defined as a “declaration by a Tribunal to the Church that a marriage never legally existed as a sacramental union according to canon law” (Zwack, 1983, p. 1). Furthermore, Catholics who divorce and remarry without obtaining an annulment cannot receive the sacraments (Zwack, 1983). Given these differences, it is possible that Protestants and Catholics would feel somewhat differently toward an ex-spouse who was perceived as having caused a divorce. Interestingly, there is evidence that Catholics have a lower rate of divorce than Protestants (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996).

### ***Present Study***

This study addressed the following questions: (1) What is the relationship between forgiveness of one’s ex-spouse and mental health? It was hypothesized that after controlling for demographic/background variables, Forgiveness would be positively correlated with Hope, Existential Well-Being, and Religious Well-Being, and negatively correlated with Depression, State Anger, and Trait Anger. (2) Do both

Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) and Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) contribute uniquely to the prediction of mental health after controlling for demographic variables? It was hypothesized that after controlling for demographic variables, Forgiveness (AN) would predict mental health beyond Forgiveness (PP) and vice versa. (3) Do divorced individuals believe that forgiveness of one's ex-spouse is important for emotional healing following a divorce? It was hypothesized that most divorced individuals would view forgiving their ex-spouse as an important step in the healing process. (4) Do Protestants and Catholics differ with respect to the importance placed on forgiving or the practice of forgiving one's ex-spouse? No *a priori* hypotheses were made with respect to this question. (5) Does religious affiliation moderate the relationship between forgiveness and mental health? No *a priori* hypotheses were made with respect to this question.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 199$ ) from several Midwestern cities were recruited from Protestant and Catholic sponsored divorce recovery groups, and from nonreligious community singles organizations. Participants' religious affiliations included Catholic (49%), Protestant (45%), and other (6%). The majority of participants were female (75%) and Caucasian (98%). Participants reported their highest level of education as follows: high school diploma or less (36%), associate's degree (20%), bachelor's degree (27%), graduate degree (17%). The number of divorces experienced by participants ranged from 0 to 4 ( $M = 1.2$ ,  $SD = .7$ ), with most participants (68%) indicating that they had been divorced only once. Approximately 8% of participants indicated that their first divorce had not yet been finalized and 4% did not respond to this question. Participants who had experienced more than one divorce (20%) were instructed to respond to questions while considering their most recent divorce. Reported length of time since the divorce ranged from 0 to 22 years ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ). When asked about their current romantic relationship status, participants indicated they were not dating (61%), casually dating (18%), in a long-term dating relationship (13%), or remarried (8%). Approximately 90% of the sample reported that they have children.

Participants reported that ex-spouses committed a variety of types of wrongdoing including broken commitment/unwanted relationship breakup (37%), infidelity (34%), verbal/emotional abuse (19%), wrongdoing related to children (18%), lying (13%), physical/sexual abuse (8%), gossip/wrongful accusation (7%), unfair distribution of assets subsequent to the divorce (7%), excessive use of drugs/alcohol (6%), and miscellaneous (14%). Percentages add to more than 100 because many participants indicated that they were wronged in more than one way. In response to a question about whether they had forgiven their ex-spouse, participants responded as follows: already forgiven (37%), trying to forgive (46%), not trying to forgive but plan to do so in the future (7%), did not know if they will choose to forgive (9%), no intention of forgiving (1%).

### ***Instruments***

*Demographic/background questions.* Several demographic/background questions were created in order to describe the sample and to be used as control variables when appropriate. Both continuous demographic variables (i.e., age, length of time since divorce, number of divorces, level of contact with ex-spouse) and categorical demographic variables (i.e., gender, race, education, presence of children, current relationship status) were included. Participants were also asked an open-ended question concerning how they were wronged or treated unfairly by their ex-spouse.

*Religiousness.* Religiousness was measured in several ways. To begin, participants were asked to indicate their current religious affiliation (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Other). Participants were also asked to rate their level of involvement in organized religion using a Likert-type question with response options ranging from 1 (*Not at all active*) to 4 (*Very active*). In addition, participants completed the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972). The scale consists of 10 items with a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Sample items include "My faith involves all my life" and "Nothing is as important to me as serving God as best I know how." In the present study, Cronbach alpha was .87. Scores on this scale can range between 10 and 50, with higher scores indicating higher levels of religiousness.

### ***Mental Health Measures***

*Hope.* Hope was measured using the Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991). Respondents indicate how well each of the eight Likert-type items describes them, with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Definitely false*) to 4 (*Definitely true*). Sample items for the scale include “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam” and “Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.” In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .86. Scores on this scale can range from 8 to 32, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of hope.

*Depression.* The CES-D Scale was used to measure depression (Radloff, 1977). The scale consists of 20 Likert-type items with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*Most or all of the time*). Sample items include “I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help from my family or friends” and “I felt that everything I did was an effort.” In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .94. Scores on this scale can range from 20 to 80, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of depression.

*Anger.* The State and Trait Anger Inventory (Spielberger et al., 1983) was used to assess anger. The inventory consists of two 10-item subscales (State Anger, Trait Anger). The State Anger subscale measures one’s current feelings of anger. Items are constructed using a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Very much so*). Sample items include “I am mad” and “I feel like yelling at somebody.” The Trait Anger subscale measures one’s general tendency to feel anger across situations. Items are constructed using a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Almost never*) to 4 (*Almost always*). Sample items include “I have a fiery temper” and “It makes me furious when I am criticized in front of others.” In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for State Anger was .92 and for Trait Anger was .83. Both subscales can range from 10 to 40, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of anger.

*Spiritual well-being.* Spiritual well-being was assessed using the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983). The scale consists of two 10-item subscales (Existential Well-Being, Religious Well-Being). Items are constructed using a Likert-type format with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The Existential Well-Being subscale measures one’s general sense of contentment and well-being. Sample items from the Existential Well-Being subscale are “I feel that life is a positive experience” and “I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed in.” The Religious



Well-Being subscale measures one's sense of well-being as it relates to one's religious faith. Sample items from the Religious Well-Being subscale are "I believe that God loves me and cares about me" and "I have a personally meaningful relationship with God." Cronbach's alpha for both subscales were adequate (Existential Well-Being = .92, Religious Well-Being = .93). Both subscales can range from 10 to 60, with higher scores reflecting increased well-being.

### ***Forgiveness Measures***

*Forgiveness of an ex-spouse.* The Forgiveness Scale (Rye et al., 2001) was used to assess participants' level of forgiveness toward their ex-spouse. The scale consists of two subscales: Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) and Forgiveness (Presence of Positive). Items for both subscales are constructed using a Likert-type format, with response possibilities ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The Forgiveness (AN) subscale consists of 10 items and is designed to measure the degree to which participants have overcome negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward a specific offender. Sample items include "I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this person" and "I spend time thinking about ways to get back at the person who wronged me." The Forgiveness (PP) subscale consists of five items and is designed to measure the presence of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward a specific offender. Sample items include "I wish for good things to happen to the person who wronged me" and "I have compassion for the person who wronged me." In this study, Cronbach's alphas for Forgiveness (AN) and Forgiveness (PP) were .88 and .82, respectively. Scores on the Forgiveness (AN) subscale can range from 10 to 50, while scores on the Forgiveness (PP) subscale can range from 5 to 25. Higher scores on both subscales indicate greater levels of forgiveness.

*Perceived importance of forgiveness.* An additional Likert-type question was constructed for use in this study. The question asked, "In your opinion, how important is it to forgive one's ex-spouse in order to heal from emotional wounds resulting from divorce?" Response possibilities ranged from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 4 (*Extremely important*).

### ***Procedure***

Participants ( $N = 199$ ) were recruited from 25 community organizations serving divorced individuals in several Midwestern cities. These



included Protestant church-sponsored divorce recovery groups ( $N = 11$ ), Catholic church-sponsored divorce recovery groups ( $N = 12$ ), and community singles groups with no religious affiliation ( $N = 2$ ). Groups were identified by contacting several area churches and community organizations and inquiring about whether they had or knew of groups for divorced individuals. The group leaders were subsequently contacted to determine whether they would allow the distribution of surveys among their members. Once approval was obtained, the researchers sent the group leader the number of questionnaires that corresponded with typical attendance at group meetings. Participants mailed their completed surveys directly to the researchers. Of the 704 surveys that were distributed, 239 were completed and returned (34% return rate). Of the surveys that were returned, 40 (17%) of the participants indicated they had not been wronged by their ex-spouse and were thus eliminated from the sample. Thus, a total of 199 participants remained in the sample.

## RESULTS

### *Preliminary Analyses*

As shown in Table 1, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach alphas were computed for religious, mental health, and forgiveness

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach Alphas of Religious, Mental Health, and Forgiveness Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Alpha
<i>Religious Measures</i>			
Intrinsic Religiousness	31.68	5.33	.87
Involvement in Organized Religion <sup>a</sup>	3.10	.85	--
<i>Mental Health Measures</i>			
Hope	23.48	4.02	.86
Depression	34.83	12.17	.94
State Anger	11.68	3.67	.92
Trait Anger	16.99	4.64	.83
Existential Well-Being	43.94	10.18	.92
Religious Well-Being	49.48	9.99	.93
<i>Forgiveness Measures</i>			
Forgiveness (AN)	37.32	8.44	.88
Forgiveness (PP)	16.43	4.30	.82

<sup>a</sup> Single item with Likert-type format ranging from 1 (*Not at all active*) to 4 (*Very active*)

variables. Cronbach alphas across measures ranged from .82 to .94. The correlation between the two forgiveness subscales (Forgiveness-AN and Forgiveness-PP) was .53 ( $p < .001$ ). Correlations between all mental health measures were significant and in the expected direction (absolute values of  $r$ 's ranged from .21 to .75).

Correlations were computed to determine the relationship between continuous demographic/background variables (i.e., age, length of time since divorce, number of divorces, level of contact with ex-spouse, level of involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness) and mental health measures. Hope was significantly correlated with number of previous divorces ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ), involvement in organized religion ( $r = .26, p < .001$ ), and Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ). Depression was significantly correlated with length of time since the divorce ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ), involvement in organized religion ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ), and Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = -.26, p < .001$ ). State Anger was significantly correlated with involvement in organized religion ( $r = -.25, p < .01$ ). Trait Anger was significantly correlated with age ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ), length of time since divorce ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ), number of divorces ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ), involvement in organized religion ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ), and Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ). Existential Well-Being was significantly correlated with length of time since divorce ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ), level of involvement in organized religion ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ), and Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ). Religious Well-Being was significantly correlated with level of involvement in organized religion ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), and Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = .76, p < .001$ ). Continuous demographic variables that were significantly correlated with mental health measures were controlled for in subsequent analyses.

ANOVAs were computed to examine the relationship between categorical demographic/background variables (i.e., gender, presence of children, race, education, religious affiliation, current relationship status) and mental health measures. Females scored significantly higher on Religious Well-Being ( $F(1,197) = 11.12, p < .01$ ) than males. Individuals with children exhibited significantly less State Anger ( $F(1,193) = 6.03, p < .05$ ) than individuals without children. Education was significantly related to Hope ( $F(3,195) = 5.57, p < .01$ ), State Anger ( $F(3,192) = 3.81, p < .05$ ), Religious Well-Being ( $F(3,195) = 3.88, p < .05$ ), and Existential Well-Being ( $F(3,195) = 3.87, p < .05$ ). Duncan contrasts revealed that individuals with a graduate degree scored significantly higher on Hope than individuals with less education. Individuals with a high school diploma or less scored significantly higher on Depression

and State Anger than individuals with a bachelor's degree, and significantly lower on Existential Well-Being than individuals with more education. Individuals with an associate's degree scored significantly higher than others on Religious Well-Being. Current relationship status was significantly related to Existential Well-Being ( $F(3,194) = 3.17, p < .05$ ) and Religious Well-Being ( $F(3,194) = 3.06, p < .05$ ). In both cases, individuals who had remarried scored significantly higher than individuals who had not. Categorical demographic variables that were significantly related to mental health measures were controlled for in subsequent analyses.

### ***Relationship Between Forgiveness and Mental Health After Controlling for Demographic Variables***

As shown in Table 2, forgiveness was significantly related to several measures of mental health after controlling for the effects of demographic/background variables. Consistent with hypotheses, Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) was negatively correlated with Depression ( $r = -.51, p < .001$ ), State Anger ( $r = -.38, p < .001$ ), and Trait Anger ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ), and positively correlated with Existential Well-Being ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ) and Religious Well-Being ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ). In addition, Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) was positively correlated with Existential Well-Being ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ). Contrary to hypotheses, neither of the forgiveness subscales were significantly correlated with Hope.

### ***Unique Contributions of Forgiveness (Absence of Negative) and Forgiveness (Presence of Positive) to the Prediction of Mental Health***

Two hierarchical multiple regression equations were computed to determine whether Forgiveness (AN) predicted Existential Well-Being beyond Forgiveness (PP) and vice versa. Existential Well-Being was selected as the criterion variable because, as mentioned earlier, it was the only variable that was significantly related to both forgiveness subscales after controlling for demographic/background variables. In the first equation, demographic/background variables were entered in the first step, Forgiveness (PP) was entered in the second step, and Forgiveness (AN) was entered in the third step. As shown in Table 3, Forgiveness (AN) predicted Existential Well-Being after controlling for demographic/background variables and Forgiveness (PP) ( $R^2$  change =

TABLE 2. Partial Correlations Between Forgiveness and Mental Health Measures Controlling for Demographic/Background Variables

Mental Health Measure	Forgiveness Measure	
	Forgiveness (AN)	Forgiveness (PP)
1. Hope <sup>a</sup>	.12	-.05
2. Depression <sup>b</sup>	-.51***	-.14
3. State Anger <sup>c</sup>	-.38***	-.11
4. Trait Anger <sup>d</sup>	-.32***	-.09
5. Existential Well-Being <sup>e</sup>	.46***	.21**
6. Religious Well-Being <sup>f</sup>	.22**	.12

<sup>a</sup>controlling for education, number of divorces, involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness

<sup>b</sup>controlling for length of time since divorce, involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness

<sup>c</sup>controlling for education, presence of children, involvement in organized religion

<sup>d</sup>controlling for age, length of time since divorce, number of divorces, involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness

<sup>e</sup>controlling for education, current relationship status, length of time since divorce, involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness

<sup>f</sup>controlling for gender, education, current relationship status, involvement in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness

.11,  $p < .001$ ). In the second equation, demographic/background variables were entered in the first step, Forgiveness (AN) was entered in the second step, and Forgiveness (PP) was entered in the third step. As shown in Table 4, Forgiveness (PP) did not predict Existential Well-Being after controlling for demographic/background variables and Forgiveness (AN).

### ***Comparison Between Catholics and Protestants***

*Importance of forgiveness.* Participants were asked, in their opinion, how important forgiveness is to the healing process following divorce. Response possibilities, using a Likert-type format, ranged from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 4 (*Extremely important*). Participants who indicated their religious affiliation was "Other" ( $N = 11$ ) were eliminated from

TABLE 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses (with Betas) Predicting Existential Well-Being While Controlling for Demographic/Background Variables (Step 1), Forgiveness (PP) (Step 2), and Forgiveness (AN) (Step 3)

Predictor Variable	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> Change
Step 1: Demographic/Background Variables		.31**** <sup>a</sup>
Length of time since divorce	.10	
Level of involvement in organized religion	.22**	
Intrinsic Religiousness	.30***	
Current relationship status	.02†	
Education	.03*†	
Step 2: Forgiveness (PP)	.20**	.03*** <sup>b</sup>
Step 3: Forgiveness (AN)	.44***	.11**** <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of the demographic variables to the prediction of Existential Well-Being.

<sup>b</sup>This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of Forgiveness (PP) beyond the demographic variables.

<sup>c</sup>This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of Forgiveness (AN) beyond Forgiveness (PP) and the demographic variables.

†Beta was not reported because the variable was dummy coded. Instead, this number represents the R<sup>2</sup> change value.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

this analysis. The majority of participants (74%) indicated that it was “extremely important” to forgive one’s ex-spouse. Other responses were as follows: moderately important (17%), slightly important (7%), and not at all important (2%). A t-test revealed no significant differences between Catholics and Protestants with respect to the importance they placed on forgiveness.

*Forgiveness of ex-spouse.* A separate ANCOVA was computed for each forgiveness measure to determine whether Catholic and Protestant participants differed with respect to how much they had forgiven their ex-spouse. Demographic variables that were related to the forgiveness measures were controlled for in these analyses. As shown in Table 5, there were no significant differences between Protestants or Catholics with respect to how much they had forgiven their ex-spouse.

*Religious affiliation as a moderator.* A variable is considered to be a moderator when it affects the strength and/or direction of the relationship between a predictor and a criterion variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). To test whether religious affiliation moderates the relationship between Forgiveness (AN) and mental health, a set of hierarchical mul-

TABLE 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses (with Betas) Predicting Existential Well-Being While Controlling for Demographic/Background Variables (Step 1), Forgiveness (AN) (Step 2), and Forgiveness (PP) (Step 3)

Predictor Variable	Beta	R <sup>2</sup> Change
Step 1: Demographic/Background Variables		.31*** <sup>a</sup>
Length of time since divorce	.10	
Level of involvement in organized religion	.22**	
Intrinsic Religiousness	.30***	
Current relationship status	.02†	
Education	.03*†	
Step 2: Forgiveness (AN)	.44***	.15*** <sup>b</sup>
Step 3: Forgiveness (PP)	.00	.00 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of the demographic variables to the prediction of Existential Well-Being

<sup>b</sup> This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of Forgiveness (AN) beyond the demographic variables.

<sup>c</sup> This R<sup>2</sup> change represents the unique contribution of Forgiveness (PP) beyond Forgiveness (PP) and the demographic variables.

†Beta was not reported because the variable was dummy coded. Instead, this number represents the R<sup>2</sup> change value.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

multiple regression equations were computed. Forgiveness (AN) and religious affiliation were entered in step 1 and the interaction of Forgiveness (AN) and religious affiliation was entered in step 2. Mental health variables that were significantly related to Forgiveness (AN) (i.e., Depression, State Anger, Trait Anger, Existential Well-Being, Religious Well-Being) served as criterion variables. There were no significant incremental R<sup>2</sup> changes, indicating that religious affiliation did not moderate the relationship between Forgiveness (AN) and mental health. However, religious affiliation did moderate the relationship between Forgiveness (PP) and Existential Well-Being. For this analysis, Forgiveness (PP) and religious affiliation were entered in step 1 and the interaction of Forgiveness (PP) and religious affiliation was entered in step 2. The interaction of Forgiveness (PP) and religious affiliation significantly predicted Existential Well-Being beyond both variables separately (R<sup>2</sup> change = .03,  $p < .05$ ). Follow-up analyses showed that after controlling for demographic variables, the partial correlation between Forgiveness (PP) and Existential Well-Being for Protestants was .41

TABLE 5. ANCOVAs Comparing Protestant and Catholic Participants on Forgiveness Measures Controlling for Demographic Measures

Variable	Protestant (N = 88)		Catholic (N = 94)		F-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Forgiveness (AN) <sup>a</sup>	38.24	8.38	36.39	8.68	1.53
Forgiveness (PP) <sup>b</sup>	17.08	3.91	15.74	4.62	2.69

*Note:* Participants who indicated their religious affiliation was "Other" (N = 11) were eliminated from these analyses. Correlations computed between Forgiveness (AN) and continuous demographic variables revealed significant relationships with the following: length of time since divorce ( $r = .32, p < .001$ ); level of activity in organized religion ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ); Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ). Correlations computed between Forgiveness (PP) and continuous demographic variables revealed significant relationships with the following: length of time since divorce ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ); level of activity in organized religion ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ); Intrinsic Religiousness ( $r = .36, p < .001$ ), and level of contact with ex-spouse ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ). ANOVAs computed to examine the relationship between Forgiveness (AN) and categorical demographic variables revealed two significant relationships. Individuals with a high school diploma scored significantly lower on Forgiveness (AN) than individuals with more education ( $F(3, 195) = 5.73, p < .01$ ). Remarried individuals scored significantly higher on Forgiveness (AN) than individuals who were not remarried ( $F(3, 194) = 2.93, p < .05$ ). ANOVAs revealed no significant associations between Forgiveness (PP) and categorical demographic variables. Demographic variables that were significantly related to forgiveness measures were controlled for in these analyses.

<sup>a</sup> level of activity in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness, length of time since the divorce, current relationship status, and education were controlled for in this analysis.

<sup>b</sup> level of activity in organized religion, Intrinsic Religiousness, length of time since divorce and level of contact with ex-spouse were controlled for in these analyses.

( $p < .001$ ), whereas for Catholics, the partial correlation was .02 ( $p > .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

### *Forgiveness and Mental Health*

Consistent with hypotheses, this study found significant correlations between forgiveness and several measures of mental health after controlling for the effects of demographic/background variables. Both Forgiveness (AN) and Forgiveness (PP) were positively correlated with Existential Well-Being. The positive relationship between forgiveness and Existential Well-Being has been demonstrated through earlier stud-



ies using both correlational (e.g., Rye et al., 2001) and experimental methods (Rye et al., 2002). Similarly, Forgiveness (AN) was negatively correlated with depression after controlling for demographic/background variables. This relationship with depression has also been previously demonstrated through studies using both correlational (e.g., Glasner, 2002) and experimental methods (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996).

The findings from studies using well-controlled experimental methodologies suggest that forgiveness can cause improvements in mood and overall sense of well-being. However, the mechanisms by which forgiveness affects Depression and Existential Well-Being are unclear. Research has documented that depressed individuals have maladaptive thought patterns and that their mood can improve when individuals modify their pattern of thinking (Beck, 1979). Perhaps forgiveness decreases rumination and provides individuals with a new way to think about their circumstances that improves overall mood and sense of well-being.

Forgiveness (AN) was positively related to Religious Well-Being after controlling for demographic/background variables. This makes sense given that forgiveness is strongly encouraged by many religions (Rye et al., 2000). Cognitive dissonance may be reduced when religious individuals act toward their ex-spouse in a manner consistent with religious teachings. Indeed, the majority of individuals in this sample viewed forgiveness as essential to the healing process.

In addition, Forgiveness (AN) was negatively correlated with both State and Trait Anger. Other researchers have reported similar findings (e.g., Glasner, 2002; Luskin & Thoresen, 1997, as cited in Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998). It is not surprising that forgiveness of others relates negatively to anger because part of the definition of forgiveness involves letting go of feelings of anger and hostility. This is also consistent with the theory of Mauger et al. (1992) that forgiveness of others relates to an extrapunitive orientation. In other words, individuals perceive the source of wrongdoing to be another person and thus "punish" that individual through maintaining feelings of anger and resentment. However, it should be noted that maintaining anger for a prolonged period of time may have the paradoxical effect of inadvertently punishing oneself through increased physical (Barefoot, Dahlstrom, & Williams, 1983; Siegel, 1992) and emotional problems (Siegel, 1992).

Contrary to hypotheses, neither of the forgiveness measures were related to Hope. This contrasts with other researchers who have found a positive relationship between forgiveness and hope (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Freedman & Enright, 1996). The differences across findings may be partly related to the use of different hope measures and the type of wrongdoing experienced by participants.

Interestingly, after controlling for demographic/background variables, Forgiveness (AN) contributed uniquely to the prediction of Existential Well-Being beyond Forgiveness (PP) but not vice versa. Furthermore, Forgiveness (AN) was related to more measures of mental health than Forgiveness (PP). This is consistent with previous research (e.g., Glasner, 2002). Perhaps the overcoming of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward an ex-spouse is more important to Existential Well-Being following a divorce than developing a positive response toward the ex-spouse. Further research is needed to determine if there are benefits of developing a positive response toward an ex-spouse that have not yet been measured.

### ***Forgiveness and Religion***

There were no differences between Protestant and Catholic participants with respect to the perceived importance of forgiveness. Furthermore, there were no differences between Protestant and Catholic participants with respect to forgiveness of their ex-spouse. Interestingly, religious affiliation moderated the relationship between Forgiveness (PP) and Existential Well-Being, but not the relationship between Forgiveness (AN) and mental health. Thus, while letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward an ex-spouse may have benefits for both Protestants and Catholics, engendering a positive perspective toward an ex-spouse may be more important to Protestants' sense of well-being. The reason for this finding is unclear. Perhaps forgiveness is conceptualized somewhat differently in Protestant and Catholic traditions, with Protestants focusing more on the importance of maintaining a positive perspective toward offenders than Catholics. If true, maintaining a positive perspective toward an offender might reduce cognitive dissonance for Protestants and thereby enhance one's sense of well-being. This interpretation is speculative and more research is needed to replicate these results and to further explore the similarities

and differences that may exist between Catholics and Protestants with respect to forgiving an ex-spouse.

### *Study Limitations*

Several limitations to this study should be noted. To begin, the sampling method makes it unclear how well the results will generalize. The majority of participants were recruited from church-based divorce recovery groups. It seems likely that individuals who choose to attend such groups may differ on important characteristics from individuals who choose not to attend such groups. It is also possible that individuals who returned the survey differed from individuals who did not return the survey. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics of the Protestant and the Catholic participants in this sample are not representative of the populations of adherents. More research is needed to explore whether there are meaningful differences with respect to how Protestants and Catholics approach forgiveness.

Another study limitation concerns the exclusive use of self-report measures. Self-report questionnaires can be useful and are widely employed in forgiveness research. However, researchers should consider supplementing self-report measures with measures of observer report. For forgiveness researchers studying divorced individuals, this might be accomplished by having participants nominate a close friend whom they have confided in regarding their divorce.

### *Implications and Future Research Questions*

In spite of the limitations described above, this study has important implications for mental health practitioners. To begin, it appears that forgiveness of an ex-spouse relates to improved mental health. Specifically, forgiveness of an ex-spouse related positively to Existential and Religious Well-Being and negatively to Depression and Anger. In addition, it appears that letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward an ex-spouse is more closely related to mental health than developing a positive response toward an ex-spouse. This does not preclude the possibility that developing a positive response toward an ex-spouse has other benefits for the individual. However, this finding may provide encouragement for those divorced individuals who want to forgive, but who believe that it is unrealistic for them to respond positively toward their ex-spouse. It appears that merely learn-

ing to let go of negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors can be beneficial.

In addition, this study suggests that a large percentage of divorced individuals believe that forgiveness is extremely important for emotional healing following divorce. It is possible that individuals in this sample, who were largely recruited from church-based divorce recovery groups, value forgiveness more than the general population. However, this study highlights the importance of exploring the values of religious clients on concepts such as forgiveness. While forgiveness does not necessarily always occur within a religious context, the two are often interconnected (Pargament & Rye, 1998). Finally, this study suggests that the presence of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward an ex-spouse may play a greater role in well-being among Protestants than Catholics. Research is needed to replicate this finding and to further examine possible similarities and differences between Protestants and Catholics. At the very least, practitioners need to be sensitive to the religious values of their clients and their possible impact on how clients cope with divorce.

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