

## **The relationship between forgiveness and personality traits, mental health among sample Jordanian university students.**

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### **Abstract**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness, personality traits and mental health among sample in Jordanian university students. Participants of the study consisted of 450 completed forgiveness trait questionnaire, personality traits questionnaire and mental health questionnaire. Means, standard deviations and correlation analysis were used for data. Results indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between forgiveness traits, personality traits and mental health.

**Key words:** forgiveness trait, Personality traits, Mental health, University students.

### **Introduction:**

forgiveness is a central topic among religious scholars, social scientists, and recently, communication scholars (Hope, 1987; Kelley & Waldron, 2008; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Past forgiveness literature has examined the role of forgiveness in romantic partners, friendships and parent-child relationship; however, forgiveness literature is limited in adult sibling relationships. Investigating forgiveness in adult sibling relationships may provide valuable insight into long term family relationships. A sibling relationship are one of the few involuntary relationships (Bevan & Stetzenback, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Hess, 2000), as well as one of the longest relationships individuals will have (Noller, 2005). There are multiple conceptualizations of forgiveness among scholars. Several scholars focus on the relational aspect of forgiveness. Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) define forgiveness as “the ability to overcome negative emotions of judgments of a transgressor, not by denying these emotions or judgments, but by viewing the transgressor with compassion, benevolence, and love”. Similar to this definition,

Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler (2004) define forgiveness as a relational process of releasing negative effect in order to preserve or maintain a relationship. Others define forgiveness as motivation-based. McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) define forgiveness as “the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender; and c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender’s hurtful actions”. Fincham, Paleari, and Regalia (2002) define forgiveness similarly as “a transformation in which motivation to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is lessened and prosocially motivation toward the transgressor is increased” .

Forgiveness is one of the structures that has been the center of attention of many researches during the last decade, and most of the researches have focused on the medical interventions of forgiveness (Ross, Hertenstein & Wrobel, 2007), because it has an effect on the individuals’ functions and on their relationships (Volkman, 2009). Clinical interviews with the individuals that have gone through the meander of forgiveness showed that the forgiveness results in peace and release of the person from hatred and loathing, and makes fundamental changes in the thoughts and change the negative and destructive thoughts to constructive thoughts. It also makes the criminal to be more ashamed of his/her crime and put a side hurting others, ultimately resulting in moral and spiritual development (Ghobari Bonab, 2009).

Forgiveness has physical, mental, social and spiritual benefits as well, and researches have shown the influences of forgiveness on the regulation of blood pressure, reduction of cardiovascular diseases, anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic illnesses and generally have shown its influence on the health. Health is a broad concept, and its definition varies under the influence of awareness and the society’s attitudes with different geographical and cultural situations (Jane and Jennie, 2000), and the mental health which is considered as one of the dimensions of health, is a state of welfare by which the person can understand his/her or others abilities, work beneficially, endure the life pressures and contribute with the society (World Health Organization, 2005). Mental health is somehow broader than the lack of psychosis (Kashala, 2005), and in its general concept refers to the health of thought and mental balance and having positive mental characteristics (Anasori, 2008). Numerous factors can affect the humans’ mental health and forgiveness is one of the effective factors on it which has been discussed by the mental health specialists in the recent years. It seems that people, who perform forgiveness, change their citations about the terms of causality and the offender’s personality, and this change of citation affect the concept and the capabilities of champ, and in this way affects the mental and physical health (Berry and et al., 2005). It is probable that the forgiveness conduct its positive

influences on the health through the reduction of champ, and accordingly reduces the negative emotions such as resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility, folded rage and fear (Ehteshamzadeh, 2009).

***The relationship between forgiveness and mental health, personality traits:***

In a research, Ghobari Bonab, Keyvanzadeh & Vahdat Torbati (2008) surveyed the relationship between the forgiveness rate and the students' mental health, and the results showed that the students with higher forgiveness have less depression, anxiety, and interpersonal problems compared to the other group. Research results of Saif and Bahari (2004) in the survey of relationship between forgiveness and the couples' mental health also showed that there is a meaningful relationship between forgiveness and the couples' mental health. Lawler- Row and Piferi (2006) conducted a research with 425 adult examinees with age 50-95 and studied them from the forgiveness trait, and variables related to health. The research results showed that the forgiveness trait has positive relationship with health behaviors, social support, mental welfare, and psychological wellbeing, and has negative relationship with depression and stress, although there was no meaningful relationship seen between forgiveness and physical signs. After reviewing 18 studies about the benefits of forgiveness on mental health, Toussaint & Webb (2005) specified that people who forgive faults, have shown kind of less anxiety, anger and depression. Berry & et al. (2005) stated that probably the forgiveness increases the mental health through influencing on social support, interpersonal performance and healthy behavior. Furthermore, forgiveness is effective on the peoples' physical health through positive influence on couples' relationships. Also, the research of Brown & Philips (2005) showed that the tendency toward forgiveness is the anticipant of lower levels of depression. Moreover, Maltby, Macaskill & Day (2001) examined the relationship between forgiveness, character, social desirability and public health with the use of 324 participants, in a research named failure to forgive yourself and others. Their research results demonstrated that failure to forgive yourself is accompanied by higher levels of depression and anxiety in men and women.

neuroticism-emotional stability, extraversion introversion, openness closedness to experience, agreeableness-antagonism, and conscientiousness un-directedness. The five factor of personality has received some attention in previous studies of forgiveness (Worthington, 1998). In a review of these studies, Neuroticism is an inhibitory characteristic of forgiveness has received empirical support (Ashton et al, 1998). Not surprisingly, angry hostility, an important facet of Neuroticism, has been implicated as a consistent barrier to forgiveness (McCullough and Worthington,

1999). On the other hand, Agreeableness as a fostering characteristic of forgiveness (Worthington, 1998). Empirical research generally supports this hypothesis, finding positive correlations between agreeableness and forgiveness of others (Ashton et al, 1998; McCullough and Worthington, 1999; Ross et al, 2004; Mullet et al, 1999). However, the research findings are not entirely consistent. For instance, Agreeableness was significantly related to receiving forgiveness from others and God but was not related to forgiving others (Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). Correlations between forgiveness of others and neuroticism were negative with the exception of Brown' (2003) study . Forgiveness of others was positively related to Extraversion and the associated facets of warmth and positive emotions (Shoemaker and Bolt, 1977). Although Walker and Gorsuch found that individuals who were introverted were less likely to receive forgiveness from others, they found no relationship between forgiving others and the assurgency/extraversion domain (Walker and Gorsuch,2002). Correlations between forgiveness of others and conscientiousness were mostly positive (Mullet et al, 1999). Worthington also posited that Openness to Experience is a fostering characteristic of forgiveness(Worthington, 1998). However, several studies have failed to find a relationship between Openness to Experience and forgiveness of others(Ashton et al, 1998; McCullough and Worthington, 1999Ross et al, 2004; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). It should be noted that a negative correlation between the imagination facet of openness to experience and forgiveness of others (Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). Several studies have also failed to find a relationship between forgiveness of others and Conscientiousness (Ashton et al, 1998; Ross et al, 2004; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). However, a positive correlation between the dutifulness facet of conscientiousness and forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness of others and receiving God forgiveness) (Walker and Gorsuch, 2002).

### **Study purpose and Questions:**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness and personality traits and mental health among the students at Al-Balaq'a Applied University in Jordan.

The specific study questions that guided this study were:

RQ1. What different forgiveness trait and mental health do students have?.

RQ2. Is there a significant relationship between the students forgiveness and personality traits, mental health?.

**Significance of the study:**

The purpose of the study is to determine the relationships between forgiveness and personality traits, mental health.

In addition, this study is very important for many reasons:(1) shed light on the correlation between forgiveness and personality traits and mental health in Arab country. (2) the importance of the forgiveness traits from university students.(3) this is the first study in Arab country which examined the relationship between forgiveness and personality traits and mental health.

**Method****Participants:**

The sample of this study consisted of 450 undergraduate students who were enrolled in the faculties of Al-Balaqa Applied University in the academic year 2012/2013. Of these participants, 210 were male 47% and 240 were female 53%. The participants were primarily grade 1<sup>st</sup> were (n=95, 21%) , and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade were (n=105, 23% ), and 3<sup>rd</sup> were grade (n= 130, 29% ) and 4<sup>th</sup> grade were (n= 120, 27% ) who represent all levels of study at Al-Balaq'a Applied University. Therefore, participant's age ranged from 18 to 22 years.

**Instruments**

Participants completed measures of personality traits, forgiveness and mental health. Each is described are following.

*Personality traits Questionnaire:*

The instrument of personality traits was developed by Costa & McCrae (1992). The instrument consisted of (60) items self-report instrument used to measure the five personality domains according to the: neuroticism (12) items, extraversion (12) items, openness to experience (12) items, agreeableness (12) items and conscientiousness (12) items. The instrument includes self-descriptive statements that participants respond to using a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert type scale. Scores for each domain are calculated by summing the 12 item responses.

### *Forgivingness scale:*

The instrument of forgivingness trait was developed by Berry et al., (2005), a 10item measure of dispositional forgivingness, with each item being rated from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Items include, for example, ‘‘I can usually forgive and forget an insult,’’ and ‘‘I am a forgiving person.’’ Five studies adduced evidence for construct and predictive validities and estimated reliabilities (Berry et al., 2005). For the current study, to clarify the validity of the instrument, the researcher translated the items into Arabic language and then a specialist in educational psychology was asked to translate the Arabic items into English language to ensure acceptable validity indices and validated translation. The items were then given to another specialist who is proficient in both languages to compare the Arabic translation with the original. In this study, the reliability coefficient was calculated using test–retest and was found to be (0.83).

### *General Health Questionnaire:*

The questionnaire of mental health was used for studying the students’ mental health. In the current research, the 28-question form of this questionnaire was used by Goldberg & Hillier (1979) designed on its long form, through conducting factor analysis, and it consists of 4 subscales. Each of these subscales has 7 questions. There have been several studies according to the validity of questionnaire. Goldberg reported a high acceptable stability based on the retesting method and Cronbach’s Alpha calculation. Surveying the stability of this questionnaire has been reported by retesting method, half-off, and Cronbach’s Alpha respectively 0.70, 0.93, 0.90 (Taghavi, 2001). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficient of this scale has been calculated 0.91 through Cronbach’s Alpha. In the current study, to clarify the validity of the instrument, the researcher translated the items into Arabic language and then a specialist in educational psychology was asked to translate the Arabic items into English language to ensure acceptable validity indices and validated translation. The items were then given to another specialist who is proficient in both languages to compare the Arabic translation with the original. In this study, the reliability coefficient was calculated using test–retest and was found to be (0.79).

### **Procedures:**

The instruments were administered to the participants in their regular classrooms by the researcher. The researcher explained to the participants the purpose and the importance of their participation in this study. In addition, the researcher assured the participants of the confidentiality of their response and that their response would be used only for research purposes.



Then, the question booklets were distributed and instructions were given to the participants on how to answer them. The participants' responses were scored by the researcher and were entered into the computer for statistical analysis. The data were analyzed using the SPSS(V:17) package.

## Results:

To facilitate understanding the results of this study, questions of this study are divided into two questions.

**Results related to study question (1):** What different forgiveness trait and mental health do students have?.

To answer this question, the student's means and standard deviations were calculated and reported in Table 1.

Table 1: mean and standard deviations of students' forgiveness trait and mental health.

variables	Mean	SD
Forgiveness	3.81	0.70
Mental health	3.33	0.65

As table 1 show, that the scores obtained from all sub-scales of the forgiveness and mental health inventory indicate a positive situation. From sub-scales of the represent higher level of forgiveness (M=3.81) and mental health (M= 3.33).

**Results related to study question (2):** Is there a significant relationship between students forgiveness, personality traits and their mental health?.

To answer this question, the correlation coefficients between forgiveness and personality traits are presented in table 2.

Table 2: correlation between forgiveness and personality traits.

variables	neuroticism	extraversion	openness to experience	agreeableness	conscientiousness
forgiveness	.29*	.39*	.17*	.41*	.37*

\*( $p < 0.01$ )

\*\*( $p < 0.05$ )

Table 2 shows that the forgiveness trait positively related to the neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness personality traits ( $p=0.01, 0.05$ ). On the other hand, the correlation coefficients between forgiveness and mental health are presented in table 3.

Table 3: correlation between forgiveness and mental health.

variables	forgiveness
Mental health	0.55

\*( $p<0.01$ )

Table 3 shows that the forgiveness is positively related to the mental health ( $p=0.01, 0.05$ ).

### Discussion:

Our review of the literature on forgiveness and mental health suggests that theory and empirical work are at a beginning point. Vast arrays of theoretical and theological positions exist regarding the relationship between forgiveness and mental health. Empirical evidence, while sparse, is growing in support of the notion that forgiveness may have a salutary effect on mental health. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness and personality traits, mental health of university students in the faculties at Al-Balqa'a Applied University in Jordan. A sample of 450 students participated in the study by responding to the forgiveness trait questionnaire, personality traits questionnaire and mental health questionnaire. As indicated in the results section, The current research results also showed that there is a meaningful relationship between forgiveness trait and personality traits, mental health. Findings of this research are in consistent with the research results Gobari Bnab, Keyvanzadeh & Vahdat Torbati (2008), Lawler- Row & Piferi (2006), Berry & et al (2005), Toussaint & Webb (2005), Brown & Philips (2005), Lawler and et al. (2005), Saif and Bahari (2004), Maltby, Macaskill & Day(2001). Studies of the relationship between forgiveness and personality have generally been explored within the taxonomy for the five factor trait models of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Across a number of studies, the most consistent, and often most statistically significant, finding, is that higher levels of forgiveness are predicted by lower levels of neuroticism (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Conner, & Wade, 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), with the effect size of reported correlations ranging from small ( McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) to large ( Brose et al., 2005). Across studies, agreeableness seems to also show a fairly consistent positive relationship with many forgiveness measures, with the effect size



of reported correlations ranging from small (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Conner, & Wade, 2001) to medium (Brose et al., 2005; McCullough et al., 2001). For explanation of this hypothesis it can be said that forgiveness, as one of the invaluable traits of human, is an absolute necessity for the continued existence of human being. It is a trait that modifies the person from collapse state into integration state (Worthington, 2005), and it is an opportunity for recovery and reconfiguration of trust, thus it is a factor for reconnecting, based on trusting again (McCullough and et al, 2001). Forgiveness is an internal procedure which is an indicator of positive self-esteem, and it is different from enduring people who hurt us. Also there is difference in experiencing forgiveness when a person forgives other person, accept other person's forgiveness, forgives oneself and when the forgiveness is from God. Yet, through each of these dimensions, a combination of affection, cognition and behavior is considered which motivates the person toward studying after making imaginary or real mistakes (Brown & Philips, 2005). Forgiveness, as one of the important processes of psychology is in the lead of communication, emotion, spiritual and physical growth of the human being, and it can promote the mental health by influencing the interpersonal function and healthy behavior. Forgiveness results in reduction and relieve of pain and sufferings created during the person's life, and according to Tusanit & Webb (2005), the forgiveness reduces the amount of anxiety, anger, and depression in the forgiving person. Also, most of the researches have shown the positive results of forgiveness on reducing stress, anxiety, depression, blood pressure, cardio vascular and psychosomatic diseases. Forgiveness is a real decision and change in the peoples' emotional experiences that has a relationship with physical and mental health (Worthington, 1998). As a matter of fact, when someone forgives others' mistakes, she/he has changed her/his thoughts about the offender, and this change brings mental health for the forgiving person, as well as leaving positive psychological, and spiritual effects on the offender, in a way that it could improve the offender's behavior. As a result, forgiveness could be a way for increasing the physical and mental health, followed by life satisfaction. From the theoretical standpoint, the following line of research is suggested for the future research should continue to examine other variables such as forgiveness and attachment styles.

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