

# Strategies for Coping With Interpersonal Hurt: Preliminary Evidence for the Relationship Between Coping and Forgiveness

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This study provides a preliminary empirical test suggesting a coping framework that describes the behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities related to the process that may lead to forgiveness. Among 170 participants, the study explored the coping strategies people use when they respond to an interpersonal hurt and also the general use of coping strategies. After controlling for dispositional forgiveness, results indicated that people use similar coping techniques both for general stressors and for interpersonal hurt. They prefer avoidance coping strategies early in the forgiveness process and approach strategies in the middle and later stages. Applied implications are discussed.

Forgiveness is generally defined as a process in which one moves from feelings of anger and the desire to retaliate or withdraw, to being motivated to respond benevolently to a transgressor (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Worthington, 2001). Yet, despite a veritable explosion of theorizing and research on forgiveness in the past decade (Strelan & Covic, 2006), very little is known about the actual behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities in which people engage that might lead them to forgiveness.

Numerous task-stage models of forgiveness have been proposed to identify the stages people go through in forgiving. Regrettably, the majority of these models remain to be operationalized (Strelan & Covic, 2006), and the few that have been validated tend to focus on stage-relevant constructs rather than the specific behaviors, thoughts, or emotions that make up those constructs. Interventions have been shown to be successful in guiding people to forgiveness (see Baskin & Enright, 2004, and Wade & Worthington, 2005, for reviews). However, it is not clear that procedures followed in the clinical setting generalize to other contexts or that laypeople are necessarily as deliberative about forgiving as clinical interventions require (Strelan & Covic, 2006). Research on social-cognitive predictors indicates the psychological conditions necessary to forgive, for example, empathy, apology (McCullough et al., 1997), severity, responsibility attributions, and relationship commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). However, such studies do not explicate what behavioral, cognitive, or emotion-focused activities

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people engage in to experience empathy, for example, or to regain a sense of commitment. It is well established that some people are more disposed to forgive than others (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005), but it is not clear, in functional terms, what people predisposed to forgive are doing that differentiates them and helps them to more readily forgive. Finally, researchers have endeavored to delineate what forgiveness means to laypeople (Kanz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Although the latter studies have revealed something about people's beliefs about forgiveness, they do not explain how people go about forgiving. In short, although these different perspectives all contribute to the understanding of forgiveness, the behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities in which people engage when they are in the process that leads to forgiveness remain unclear.

Identifying such activities would be important in numerous ways. At a theoretical level, researchers' understanding of the process and dynamics of forgiveness would be enhanced. At an applied level, clinicians and counselors would be able to offer improved guidance and interventions. There would also be a clearer insight into how forgiveness principles may best be promoted beyond situations involving intimate relationships, such as in the workplace, the justice system, and between religious and cultural groups.

Some researchers have proposed that the forgiveness process may be conceptualized in coping terms (Pargament & Rye, 1998; Strelan & Covic, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). That is, after individuals have been hurt, they need to find a way of dealing with what happened. One possible response, among many (Wade & Worthington, 2003), is to come to a point at which one forgives the transgressor. A fundamental requirement of forgiveness is to first get over what has happened (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 2001). The process of getting over an interpersonal hurt and arriving at an ultimately forgiving response may be similar to the coping process. As the following sections suggest, coping may provide a useful framework for identifying the activities in which people engage when they go through the forgiveness process.

In broad terms, *coping* refers to the thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to manage the internal and external demands of particular situations that they appraise as being personally relevant and stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When people react to a stressful event, they engage in two separate although interdependent appraisals. A *primary appraisal* is akin to asking, "Is this stressful?" If it is, a *secondary appraisal* ("What can I do?") is conducted, and people then use various coping strategies designed to remove, reduce, or tolerate stress. Primary and secondary appraisals continue to be performed throughout the coping process as people respond to new information about the event and their own emotional and cognitive reactions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The coping strategies that people use tend to be conceptualized dichotomously, and many different conceptualizations exist, for example, problem focused versus emotion focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), mastery versus meaning (Taylor, 1983), and assimilative versus accommodative (Brändstadter, 1992). In the current study, coping strategies are defined in terms of their

approach and avoidance qualities (Moos, 1993). *Approach-type coping* is akin to problem solving. It represents a direct response to a stressful event and involves taking action to bring about some change in one's environment (e.g., seeking information, planning, and learning new skills). *Avoidance-type coping* involves the attempt to reduce stress by regulating one's emotions and cognitions about the situation (e.g., venting emotions, accepting the problem, reinterpretation, and rumination), which often means assigning a new meaning to the event. People often use the two strategy types in combination, sometimes one before the other, sometimes simultaneously, depending on the situation. Each strategy type can influence the other, and the effectiveness of each will depend on how it is being used in a given situation (Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000).

There are numerous ways in which the coping process may be seen to operate when people progress through the process that leads to forgiveness (Strelan & Covic, 2006). Here, the most salient of these are summarized. First, a transgression is stressful and the forgiveness process is one way of reacting to, or coping with, such a stressor. Second, reactions to a transgression—at any point in the forgiveness process—are primary and secondary appraisals ("Is this stressing me, and what can I do about it?"). Third, approach and avoidance coping strategies can describe what people do in the forgiveness process. For example, one may say that individuals are using an avoidance coping strategy when they are attempting to reduce the initial anger and hostility that often arises as a consequence of a transgression. At another time, perhaps later in the forgiveness process, they may engage in self-blame, wishful thinking, or denial, activities that may also reflect avoidance coping strategies. Approach coping strategies may be seen when people attempt to deal directly with the source of their distress, for example, by discussing with the offender what happened, seeking redress, or simply deciding what to do next.

In short, coping appears to provide a useful framework for beginning to understand the behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities in which people engage when they are in the process of forgiving. However, there is a paucity of studies that have empirically examined the likely relationship between forgiveness and coping. Maltby, Day, and Barber (2004) focused on locating forgiveness within a personality-coping model. Konstam, Holmes, and Levine (2003) addressed the relationship between coping style and forgiveness. Clearly, much more work is required, particularly at the fundamental level of describing forgiveness in coping terms.

The current study addressed three research questions. The first question explores the potential relationship between forgiveness and coping. Researchers (e.g., Strelan & Covic, 2006) have suggested that the behavioral, cognitive, and emotion-focused activities in which people engage to arrive at a forgiving response to an interpersonal transgression are similar to the activities in which people engage when they attempt to cope with everyday stressors. Thus, Research Question 1 is What is the relationship between the source of stress (i.e., general stressor and interpersonal hurt) and the type of coping strategy (i.e., approach and avoidance) that people use?

Research Question 2 addresses the coping strategies people prefer when they deal with interpersonal hurt: To what extent do people choose approach over avoidance coping strategies, and, within each strategy category, which techniques are preferred? For comparison purposes, coping strategies in relation to general stressors were also examined.

Research Question 3 asks, Which coping strategies do people prefer at different stages in the forgiveness process? Although numerous process models of forgiveness have been proposed, and all vary in their specific content, at a broad level they tend to be fairly similar (Strelan & Covic, 2006). In the current study, the forgiveness process was operationalized using Gordon and Baucom's (2003) Forgiveness Process Model, one of the rare few that has been operationalized and empirically validated. Gordon and Baucom proposed that forgiveness occurs in three stages: impact, searching for meaning, and moving on. The impact stage refers to the intense cognitive, affective, and behavioral disruptions that occur following a transgression, during which time the victim realizes the effect of the transgression on him- or herself and on the relationship. In the second stage, searching for meaning, the victim tries to understand why the betrayal occurred in order to make sense of the offender's behavior and of his or her own responses to it. At this stage, individuals often find themselves changing their attributions, legitimizing their emotions, or attempting to regain control of their thoughts and emotions. In the third and final moving on stage, the victim moves beyond the event and stops allowing it to control his or her life. The current study explored the extent to which approach and avoidance coping strategies are preferred at the impact, searching for meaning, and moving on stages.

Finally, it is well established that individual differences interact with situation-specific variables to produce behavior (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1999) and that some people are more predisposed to forgive than others (see Berry et al., 2005, for a review). Accordingly, the current study took into account the potential influence that dispositional forgiveness may have on the relationship between the forgiveness and the coping processes.

## Method

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### *Participants*

There were 170 participants, of whom 119 (70%) were undergraduate psychology students at a large Australian university who were participating for partial course credit (78 women, 41 men; age,  $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 3.39$ ) and 51 (30%) were nonuniversity students who constituted a convenience sample included to bolster the total sample (31 women, 20 men; age,  $M = 27$ ,  $SD = 11.48$ ). In total, there were 109 women and 61 men, with ages ranging from 17 to 51 years ( $M = 22$ ,  $SD = 7.86$ ). Although ethnicity data were not collected, the majority of participants were White.

### *Procedure*

The study was advertised to the university students through an electronic forum dedicated to undergraduate psychology on campus. The nonuniversity

participants were recruited via e-mail through personal contacts of the second researcher (second author), using a snowball technique. All participants completed a packet of instruments online. After accessing the relevant Web page, participants first read an information sheet that explained the purpose of the study, detailed what would be required of participants, and addressed the appropriate ethical considerations. Participants could only proceed once they had acknowledged that they had read the consent form and had indicated they had done so by clicking the appropriate button at the bottom of the screen.

## Measures

*Coping Responses Inventory-Adult (CRI-Adult; Moos, 1993).* Coping strategies for interpersonal hurt and general stress events were measured using the 48-item, eight-subscale CRI-Adult. The 6-item subscales (subscale scores range from 0 to 18) assess 48 behavioral and cognitive activities, with each item rated on a scale using a 4-point rating continuum (0 = *no* to 3 = *fairly often*). Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater use of the respective coping techniques. Four subscales assess individual use of approach strategies: Logical Analysis, Positive Reappraisal, Seeking Guidance and Support, and Problem Solving. The Logical Analysis subscale assesses the use of cognitive tasks that focus on the problem and help to determine what one will do next (sample item, "Think of different ways to deal with the problem"). The Positive Reappraisal subscale assesses the ability to see the problem in a positive way or cognitively reduce the problem's negative impact (sample item, "Try to see the good side of the situation"). The Seeking Guidance and Support subscale focuses on the ability to obtain input from another to overcome the problem (sample item, "Talk with a friend about the problem"). The Problem Solving subscale assesses the capacity to make deliberate, pragmatic efforts to deal with a stressor, such as making and following a plan (sample item, "Take things a day at a time, one step at a time").

Four CRI-Adult subscales assess individuals' use of avoidance strategies: Cognitive Avoidance, Acceptance or Resignation, Seeking Alternative Rewards, and Emotional Discharge. The Cognitive Avoidance subscale identifies the use of cognitive efforts aimed at denying, minimizing, or forgetting the problem at hand (sample item, "Try to forget the whole thing"). The Acceptance or Resignation subscale assesses the coping strategy of accepting a situation rather than attempting to do something about it, such as thinking nothing can be done or leaving the outcomes to be decided by fate or others (sample item, "Expect the worst possible outcome"). The Seeking Alternative Rewards subscale assesses the coping strategy of turning to alternative sources for pleasure or gain or to escape from the problem, such as turning to work or sport for enjoyment or finding new friends (sample item, "Get involved in new activities"). The Emotional Discharge subscale assesses behavioral efforts aimed at reducing the extent to which one may be experiencing certain emotions and can include venting, yelling, crying, and withdrawal (sample item, "Take a chance and do something risky").

Participants completed the CRI-Adult twice: once after thinking about a general stress event that had happened to them and once after thinking about an interpersonal hurt event that they had experienced. Order of presentation was counterbalanced. Cronbach's alphas were acceptable for these scales:  $\alpha = .86$  (Approach Coping Styles, interpersonal hurt event),  $.81$  (Avoidance Coping Styles, interpersonal hurt event),  $.87$  (Approach Coping Styles, general stress event), and  $.82$  (Avoidance Coping Styles, general stress event). Subscale reliabilities ranged from  $\alpha = .53$  (Emotional Discharge, general stress event) to  $\alpha = .76$  (Seeking Alternative Rewards, interpersonal hurt event). Moos (1988) provided evidence for the validity and reliability of the CRI-Adult, and Moos, Brennan, Fondacaro, and Moos (1990) reported internal consistencies for the subscales ranging from  $.61$  to  $.74$ .

*Gordon and Baucom Forgiveness Inventory (GBFI; Gordon & Baucom, 2003).* The forgiveness process was assessed using the self-report GBFI. It consists of 23 behavioral, cognitive, and affective items, each rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *almost never* to 5 = *almost always*). Three stages of forgiveness are encompassed by the subscales: Impact (8 items, e.g., "My emotions about what happened change from day to day"), Searching for Meaning (8 items, e.g., "My emotions about what happened are becoming clearer"), and Moving On (7 items, e.g., "I feel I am ready to put what happened behind me"). Higher scores on a subscale reflect increased engagement of behaviors, cognitions, and emotion-focused activities hypothesized to occur during that particular stage of forgiveness. Scores could range from 8 to 40 for the Impact and Searching for Meaning subscales and from 7 to 35 for the Moving On subscale. Cronbach's alphas for each subscale were weak:  $\alpha = .54$  (Impact),  $.64$  (Searching for Meaning), and  $.68$  (Moving On). Participants completed the GBFI in response to the same interpersonal hurt event that was used for the CRI-Adult. Validity and reliability of the instrument has been documented by Gordon and Baucom, who reported internal consistencies of  $.85$ ,  $.76$ , and  $.75$  for the three subscales, respectively.

*Tendency to Forgive Scale (TTF; Brown, 2003).* Dispositional forgiveness was assessed using the four-item TTF. Items are rated using a 7-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), with a higher score representing higher levels of dispositional forgiveness. Scores could range between 4 and 28. A sample TTF item is, "I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings." Cronbach's alpha for the TTF was acceptable,  $\alpha = .73$ . Validity and reliability information is reported by Brown, who demonstrated internal consistencies of  $.75$  (self ratings) and  $.82$  (partner ratings).

## Results

### *Frequencies of Interpersonal Hurt and General Stress Events*

To determine coping strategies related to interpersonal hurt events, the vast majority of participants (97%) responded to a relationship stressor, with a small minority responding regarding interpersonal hurt in occupational, financial, and academic contexts. Most participants (70%) indicated that the interpersonal hurt

event was either considerably or very hurtful (severity of hurt was measured on a 5-point scale with 1 = *slightly hurtful* and 5 = *very hurtful*).

To determine coping strategies related to general stress events, the majority of participants (57%) responded to an academic stressor, 18% of participants responded in relation to occupational or financial stressors, 12% responded with reference to a relationship stressor, and 10% designated the type of stressor as "other" (this included aspects of health or a combination of academic, financial, and relationship-related stress). Some participants did not indicate the type of stressor that they referred to for their response.

Independent group *t* tests indicated that the order in which participants responded to the interpersonal hurt and general stress events did not influence participants' Approach Coping and Avoidance Coping Styles scores (all *ps* > .10).

### *Research Question 1: What is the Relationship Between the Source of Stress and the Type of Coping Strategy That People Use?*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each of the approach and avoidance coping strategies for both interpersonal hurt and general stress events. A two-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) examining the relationship between the source of stress and the coping strategy type revealed no main effect for source of stress,  $F(1, 169) = 0.02, p > .05, \eta^2 = .00$ , suggesting that the source of stress did not determine the coping strategies that participants used. There was a main effect for coping strategy type,  $F(1, 169) = 93.01, p < .01, \eta^2 = .36$ . Table 1 indicates that approach rather than avoidance coping strategies were significantly more likely to be used as a method of coping, regardless of the situation. There was a significant interaction between source of stress and coping strategy type,  $F(1, 169) = 33.66, p < .01, \eta^2 = .17$ . The interaction is depicted in Figure 1 and suggests that although approach coping strategies were more likely to be used, this was the case only for general stress events. For interpersonal hurt events, individuals were likely to use both approach and avoidance coping strategies to the same degree.

### *Research Question 2: What Do People Do When Dealing With Interpersonal Hurt and General Stressors?*

One-way repeated measures ANOVAs (with multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni correction method) revealed significant differences within each coping strategy type for interpersonal hurt events,  $F(3, 507) = 22.67, p = .01, \eta^2 = .12$  (approach coping), and  $F(3, 507) = 10.49, p = .01, \eta^2 = .06$  (avoidance coping). As indicated by the corresponding subscale scores, among the approach coping strategies, participants were likely to use logical analysis and problem solving to the same degree ( $p > .05$ ); more likely to use logical analysis than positive reappraisal ( $p = .001$ ); and least likely to be seeking guidance and support as compared with logical analysis, problem solving, and positive reappraisal ( $p = .03$ ) coping strategies. Among the avoidance

**TABLE 1**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for the Approach and**  
**Avoidance Coping Styles Subscales for Interpersonal Hurt**  
**and General Stress Events**

Scale and Subscale	Interpersonal Hurt Event		General Stress Event	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Approach Coping Styles				
Logical Analysis	9.79	3.42	10.01	3.46
Problem Solving	9.23	3.71	10.88	3.77
Positive Reappraisal	8.52	3.86	9.68	3.84
Seeking Guidance and Support	7.59	3.48	7.30	3.34
Total	8.78	2.84	9.47	2.88
Avoidance Coping Styles				
Cognitive Avoidance	7.86	3.82	7.78	3.93
Acceptance or Resignation	6.69	3.43	5.97	3.45
Seeking Alternative Rewards	8.04	4.11	6.74	4.09
Emotional Discharge	6.62	3.21	6.13	3.21
Total	7.30	2.57	6.65	2.67

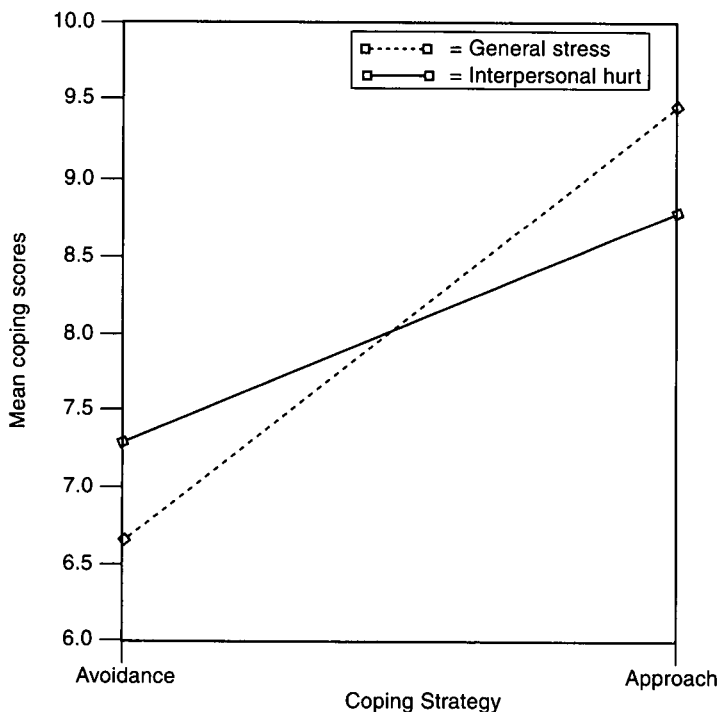
coping strategies, participants were just as likely to use seeking alternative rewards as cognitive avoidance ( $p > .05$ ) and more likely to use these two coping strategies than they were to use the acceptance or resignation and emotional discharge coping strategies ( $p = .001$ ).

One-way repeated measures ANOVAs (with multiple comparisons with Bonferroni correction method) indicated differences within each coping strategy type for general stress events,  $F(3, 507) = 63.71$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$  (approach coping), and  $F(3, 507) = 13.29$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$  (avoidance coping). Among the approach coping strategies, participants were more likely to use problem solving than they were to use logical analysis, positive reappraisal, and seeking guidance and support ( $p = .01$ ). Among the avoidance coping strategies, participants were more likely to use cognitive avoidance than they were to use acceptance or resignation, seeking alternative rewards, and emotional discharge ( $p = .01$ ).

### *Research Question 3: Which Coping Strategies Do People Prefer at Different Stages in the Forgiveness Process?*

Table 2 shows the Pearson product-moment correlations between the coping strategies for interpersonal hurt, dispositional forgiveness, and each of the three stages in the forgiveness process (i.e., impact, searching for meaning, and moving on). Approach coping strategies were not related to the impact stage of forgiving but were significantly related to the subsequent search for meaning and moving on stages. Avoidance coping strategies were significantly correlated to the impact stage, but not to the search for meaning and moving on stages. Approach coping strategies were unrelated to dispositional forgiveness, whereas avoidance coping strategies were negatively related. Dispositional forgiveness was negatively related to the impact stage





**FIGURE 1**

### **The Interaction Between Source of Stress and Coping Strategy Type**

of forgiveness, unrelated to the searching for meaning stage, and positively related to the moving on stage.

Three separate hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine the extent to which people use particular coping strategies at different points in the forgiveness process. Dispositional forgiveness was statistically controlled for by entering it at the first step. Subsequently, approach and avoidance coping strategy categories were entered together at the second step. Table 3 shows that after controlling for dispositional forgiveness, the approach and avoidance coping strategies together did not further explain variance on the impact stage,  $F_{\text{change}}(2, 166) = 2.13, p > .05$ . Avoidance coping strategy, however, retained a unique association. For the searching for meaning and moving on stages, approach coping strategies, but not avoidance coping strategies, retained a unique relationship,  $F_{\text{change}}(2, 166) = 23.01, p = .001$  (searching for meaning), and  $F_{\text{change}}(2, 166) = 13.12, p = .001$  (moving on).

Finally, it may be noted that running the analyses with data for the 51 non-university students removed produced negligible differences in results.

## **Discussion**

Some researchers have suggested that an interpersonal transgression may be conceptualized as a stressor and that the process that may result in

TABLE 2

**Pearson Product–Moment Correlations Between Coping Styles  
for Interpersonal Hurt, Stages of Forgiveness, and  
Dispositional Forgiveness**

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Approach Coping Styles	—					
2. Avoidance Coping Styles	.28**	—				
3. Impact	.00	.20**	—			
4. Searching for Meaning	.44**	.09	.30**	—		
5. Moving On	.38**	.02	-.39**	.28**	—	
6. Dispositional forgiveness	.11	-.15*	-.37**	-.11	.30**	—

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

forgiveness is one way that people cope with such a stressor (Pargament & Rye, 1998; Strelan & Covic, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). The preliminary evidence from the current study suggests that participants tended to prefer approach coping strategies in response to general stressors and both approach and avoidance coping strategies when dealing with interpersonal hurt. Among the approach coping strategies, participants seemed to be more likely to use problem solving to cope with both general stressors and interpersonal hurt. Among the avoidance coping strategies, the participants seemed to be more likely to use cognitive avoidance techniques to cope with both general stressors and interpersonal hurt. In short, when one examines the specific coping techniques that participants preferred, it appears they use the same techniques in both general stress and interpersonal hurt situations. Thus, these preliminary data suggest that the coping techniques people use in response to general stressors are also used to deal with interpersonal hurt.

It is perhaps not surprising that people use both approach and avoidance coping strategies when forgiving. Forgiveness is a complex and often lengthy

TABLE 3

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Prediction of  
Impact, Searching for Meaning, and Moving On Stages of  
Forgiveness by Coping Styles and Dispositional Forgiveness**

Step and Predictor Variable	Impact		Searching for Meaning		Moving On	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1						
Dispositional forgiveness	.14**	-.37**	.01	-.11	.09**	.30**
Step 2						
Approach Coping Styles	.02	-.00	.21**	.48**	.13**	.36**
Avoidance Coping Styles		.15*		-.07		-.04
Total $R^2$	.16**		.23**		.21**	
Adjusted $R^2$	.14**		.21**		.20**	

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

process, especially for serious transgressions. The process of forgiveness is counterintuitive and requires a person who has been hurt to overcome a tendency to retaliate or withdraw and instead respond with benevolence and compassion to the person who has hurt him or her. Moreover, forgiveness does not occur in a vacuum. Situation-specific social and cognitive factors, such as empathy, relationship commitment, apology, responsibility attributions, and severity perceptions (Finkel et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1997), and personality variables, such as narcissism and agreeableness (Berry et al., 2005), all interact to influence the forgiveness process. Nor is it likely that people move through the process in a necessarily linear fashion. Similar to coping, forgiveness is more likely to be a dynamic process in which responses to a transgression consist of a series of interrelated reappraisals and feedback and feed-forward loops (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). In short, the transformation from resentment to benevolence presents people with constantly new information and situations that consequently require the use of different coping strategies, each chosen for their appropriateness and applicability to the circumstances.

Indeed, these initial data indicate that individuals in this study prefer avoidance coping strategies early on in the forgiveness process (i.e., the impact stage) and approach coping strategies in the middle and later stages (searching for meaning and moving on). The predominance of avoidance coping strategies immediately following a transgression makes intuitive sense. When people have been hurt, they usually experience intense emotional upheaval (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) and avoidance coping strategies refer to efforts to deal with the negative cognitive and emotional responses to a stressor, for example, by minimizing the problem (cognitive avoidance) or venting anger and resentment (emotional discharge). Once people have found a way to cope with their responses to the transgressions, it appears that they may then be able to start dealing with the stressor itself (i.e., the transgression). Thus, in the searching for meaning stage, they may begin by using approach coping strategies, such as reframing the transgression (positive reappraisal) or making pragmatic plans for getting over what happened (problem solving). Approach coping strategies are also preferred in the final moving on stage of forgiveness. As the label suggests, approach coping strategies refer to efforts to deal constructively with a stressor. That they seem to be preferred in the final stages of forgiveness is consistent with the conceptualization of forgiveness as a prosocial, constructive response to a transgression (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 2001).

The research methodology in this study also took into account the potential influence of dispositional forgiveness. It appears that people predisposed to forgive are less likely to use avoidance strategies to cope with an interpersonal hurt. This might be expected: A forgiving disposition reflects a prosocial approach to conflict, whereas avoidance coping strategies reflect a preference for dealing with the cognitive and emotional consequences of conflict rather than the conflict itself. It is noteworthy that people who are

inclined to forgive seem to be less able to deal with the immediate aftermath of a transgression. Put another way, people who are not generally forgiving initially react better to being hurt. An inclination to forgive reflects a generally positive, prosocial view of the world (Schwartz, 1994); perhaps a transgression is a blow to such an outlook and therefore it is harder, initially, to deal with such an unexpected event. Conversely, people who are not naturally forgiving may have a less positive view of the world and are therefore better prepared for life's trials and tribulations. Whatever the case may be, by the time they have reached the moving on stage of forgiveness, highly forgiving people are indeed more likely to indicate that they have moved on from the transgression, as one might expect.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

Next, we note the study's limitations and suggest ways in which future research might minimize these, as well as how subsequent investigations might extend our findings. Participants' responses were limited to the approach and avoidance coping strategy options provided. In other words, participants were not offered the entire possible range of coping responses. It may be that people cope with interpersonal transgressions in many other ways, including ways not covered by other coping inventories. Future studies should consider broadening the scope of available coping options, or indeed ask participants themselves to generate the ways in which they cope. Furthermore, the conclusions in this study are based on what people *say* they do to cope with transgressions and general stressors. Future research might incorporate behavioral observation approaches and the use of third-party reports (e.g., by an important other).

The coping strategies accounted for negligible, moderate, and small amounts of variance on the impact, searching for meaning, and moving on forgiveness stages, respectively. There are two potential mitigating factors. First, although Gordon and Baucom (2003) reported adequate reliabilities (alphas  $> .70$ ) for their three subscales, in the current study the calculated alphas for the subscales were weak, negatively affecting their validity. If the items do not adequately reflect the underlying construct, then one is less likely to observe meaningful relationships with the constructs that are proposed to be conceptually similar. That said, we were unable to control the time frame within which transgressions were recalled, and it is therefore possible that this may have affected the consistency of participant responding. Nonetheless, as noted in a recent review (Strelan & Covic, 2006), operationalization of forgiveness process models remains a vexing issue. Gordon and Baucom's is one of the few process models that has been operationally defined, and so future studies should be mindful of how the forgiveness process is operationalized. A second factor that might explain the relatively small amounts of variance accounted for on the forgiveness process concerns the wide acknowledgement in the coping literature that coping strategies alone do not explain behavior. Personal-

ity, social-cognitive, and situation-specific factors also contribute to how people deal with stressful events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). To illustrate, a post hoc analysis of our data indicated that if participant ratings of the severity of the transgression had been included in the regression models, total variance accounted for on the impact stage would have increased by 8%. Thus, researchers in the future should investigate the extent to which social-cognitive and personality factors influence the coping-forgiveness relationship, including their determination of what coping strategies will be chosen and by whom. For example, to what extent does the well-established predictor of forgiveness, apology, influence the choice of approach coping strategies? To what extent does a well-known barrier to forgiveness, rumination, predict the use of avoidance coping strategies? To what extent do agreeableness and narcissism, personality factors related to forgiveness, predict choice of approach and avoidance coping strategies?

This study represents just the tip of the iceberg to the extent that much more work is required to delineate which coping strategies are more likely to be adaptive or maladaptive at what points in the forgiveness process. Here is an indication of the strategies people use to cope; it is not clear how successful their coping strategy choices are. Although the data suggest that avoidance coping strategies are preferred earlier and approach coping strategies later in the forgiveness process, there will be occasions when some specific approach techniques (e.g., seeking guidance and support) would be beneficial in the impact stage, just as there would be times when certain avoidance coping strategies (e.g., seeking alternative rewards) would still be prudent in the moving on stage. It may also depend on precisely which avoidance and approach coping strategies are used. For example, venting anger could be considered adaptive, whereas denying that the transgression had occurred would not. In short, future studies need to engage in more fine-tuned analyses of what specific techniques are more appropriate and when they are appropriate.

The coping strategies have been related to a forgiveness process that is conceptualized as being roughly linear (i.e., people deal with a transgression in three interrelated stages—impact, searching for meaning, and moving on). Yet, theorists (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) have argued that forgiveness is more of a dynamic process in that people move backward and forward between steps in the process. Although the present analysis provides a general indication of what coping strategies might be preferred at broad points in the forgiveness process, it is cross-sectional. Longitudinal studies are required and should take a closer look at how coping strategy selection influences likely movements backward and forward in the forgiveness process. That is, to what extent does perceived coping strategy success (or otherwise) influence subsequent coping strategy choices? For example, to what extent does prolonged use of certain maladaptive avoidance coping strategies eventually lead to a realization that certain approach coping strategies may be more useful and vice versa?

## Conclusion

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Finally, it might be noted that the study sample, predominantly young adults attending a university, precludes one from drawing concrete conclusions about the generalizability of the results. Nonetheless, as an exploratory foray into the empirical relationship between forgiveness and coping strategies, the study has implications for how forgiveness interventions and principles may be applied in both clinical and nonclinical settings. The study provides some insight into what it is people say they do, behaviorally and cognitively, to deal with an interpersonal hurt, and when they might do it. It appears that people use both approach and avoidance strategies to cope with interpersonal hurt and that avoidance coping strategies predominate early on while approach coping strategies are preferred in the middle and later stages of the forgiveness process. There is tentative evidence that when people use avoidance coping strategies, they tend to rely on cognitive avoidance techniques; when they use approach coping strategies, they tend to use problem-solving techniques. In short, it appears that the coping framework is indeed relevant to the forgiveness process. Consequently, beginning to identify what people do to cope with interpersonal transgressions provides the first step toward clinicians and counselors depicting a clearer picture of the successful forger: What is the ideal repertoire of coping strategies that people need to deal with interpersonal hurt and when are they best used?

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