

**Self-Forgiveness: Attending to Shame and Guilt Through Psychological Flexibility**



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**Self-Forgiveness: Attending to Shame and Guilt Through Psychological Flexibility**

**Literature Review**

**Abstract**

Research has shown that self-forgiveness – a process that tempers psychological distress while also promoting greater self-acceptance – is one way in which individuals can cope with the distress associated with a moral wrongdoing or transgression. With growing interest in the area, this literature review will summarise and evaluate the current research on self-forgiveness. In particular, it will cover the conceptualisation and measurement of self-forgiveness, and explore significant predictors of self-forgiving responses. The process of self-forgiveness has also been found to be effective in promoting positive psychological and relational outcomes. Accordingly, the research on the therapeutic and clinical applications of self-forgiveness will be reviewed. Lastly, the paper will summarise the limitations of the current literature and explore future directions for research on self-forgiveness.

Throughout life, whether inadvertently or intentionally, we all do wrong. Universally, there are countless situations where people feel responsible for causing suffering toward another. Within relationships, people may lie or fail to support one another. Parents may feel responsible when their actions result in suffering for their children. Wrongdoings that violate deeply held moral standards or values can elicit distressing emotions such as guilt and shame. Initially, painful emotions can serve a functional purpose. For instance, guilt and shame, when meaningfully interpreted, can motivate reparative action toward those affected by the wrongdoing (Gausel & Leach, 2011; Tangney, 1999) and, in turn, help to promote reconciliation and greater social belonging (Cohen et al., 2011). However, over time, chronic guilt and shame can lead to harsh self-punishment (Fisher & Exline, 2010), eliciting defensive avoidance (Schmader & Lickel, 2006) and externalising anger (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Such responses can be significantly damaging to the self and interpersonal relationships (Kim et al., 2011; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

An alternative means of coping with the distress of self-condemnation is through self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness requires the offender to accept responsibility for violating socio-moral standards, whilst also practising self-acceptance and engaging in behaviour to reaffirm transgressed values (Woodyatt et al., 2017). Increasingly, research suggests that the ability to self-forgive may be effective in promoting positive psychological and relational outcomes (Massengale et al., 2017). As such, self-forgiveness may be one way in which individuals can cope with the emotional distress associated with a perceived moral failure.

Given the growing body of research, this paper aimed to review and summarise the literature on self-forgiveness. Specifically, it will address conceptualisations of self-forgiveness and the associated challenges with its measurement. In order to better understand how self-forgiveness may be facilitated, the review will explore significant predictors affecting the process of forgiving oneself. Further, scholars have suggested that the ability to

self-forgive may help to alleviate psychological distress. Accordingly, the literature on self-forgiveness and its association with psychological outcomes will be examined, and relatedly, the research on the clinical applications of self-forgiveness in addressing psychopathology. Lastly, the limitations of the existing literature on self-forgiveness and future research directions will be addressed.

### **Understanding Self-Forgiveness**

The earliest conceptualisation of self-forgiveness, as proposed by Enright and The Human Development Study Group (1996), described it as “a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one’s acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity and love toward oneself” (p. 115). This early conceptualisation highlighted several components to self-forgiveness. First, self-forgiveness entails the meaningful interpretation and release of self-directed negative emotions, such as condemnation and resentment for one’s actions. Notably, self-resentment – the indignation of holding oneself culpable for a wrongdoing – has not been clearly operationalised within the literature on self-forgiveness (Woodyatt et al., 2017). Instead, research on self-forgiveness has predominantly focused on the reduction of self-condemning emotions, such as guilt and shame. Second, in addition to abandoning negative emotions, Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996) suggested that self-forgiveness also entails the promotion of positive emotions such as self-compassion and love for oneself. Similar definitions suggest that self-forgiveness involves showing kindness and generosity toward oneself in response to a perceived wrongdoing (Bryan et al., 2015). Relatedly, self-forgiveness has been described as a transformative process whereby the motivation to avoid offense-related stimuli and self-punishment is replaced by motivation for personal development, growth and change (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Lastly, Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996) proposed that self-forgiveness occurs in light of an ‘objective wrong’. Thus, self-forgiveness is required only



when an individual has committed a moral wrongdoing (e.g., transgressing against another) or failed to live up to socio-moral standards; in the absence of a wrongful act, there is nothing to forgive.

Whilst early conceptualisations of self-forgiveness focused on the maintenance of positive self-regard in the face of an objective wrong, more recent definitions suggest that self-forgiveness is more than simply acting kindly toward oneself. Broadly, scholars argue that the process is paradoxical in nature. In particular, it has been proposed that self-forgiveness requires both the experience of self-condemnation, and the ability to maintain positive self-regard in the presence of distressing emotions (Woodyatt et al., 2017). Moreover, the process of arriving at greater self-acceptance through self-forgiveness is contingent upon behavioural change (Wenzel et al., 2012). It involves recognition from the offender of their culpability, the experience of resultant emotions, and attempts to correct the wrongful behaviour by taking reparative action to restore a sense of a moral self (Holmgren, 1998). By acknowledging responsibility and displaying repentance, the offender may then reaffirm and recommit to the transgressed values (Wenzel et al., 2012). Given the psychological work required, self-forgiveness is also said to be a process that takes time (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Hall & Fincham, 2008). These features differentiate self-forgiveness from the alternative responses of self-punishment— an attempt to restore justice and equity by blaming and punishing the self (Exline et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2012) – and pseudo self-forgiveness – an attempt to shortcut the forgiveness process by avoiding negative feelings and abrogating responsibility, akin to excusing the self or letting oneself ‘off the hook’ (Dillon, 2001; Wenzel et al., 2012).

Although conceptualisations of self-forgiveness differ across the literature, there appears to be some agreement that self-forgiveness involves the meaningful appraisal of one’s responsibility for a perceived wrongdoing, such that appropriate action may be taken to

rectify the wrongful behaviour. In doing so, self-forgiveness can help to resolve the psychological distress caused by one's transgressed wrong, while also facilitating greater self-acceptance.

### **The Measurement of Self-Forgiveness**

With differing definitions across the research, a number of approaches have been developed to measure self-forgiveness. Conceptually, self-forgiveness can be measured at both a dispositional and state level. When measured at a dispositional level, it is a measure of people's general tendency to be forgiving over time and across situations. Conversely, state measures assess self-forgiveness in relation to a specific transgression and assess the offender's attitude toward the self. Conceptualised as a process that enables the experience of greater self-compassion and kindness (Enright, 1996; Thompson et al., 2005; Wohl et al., 2008), measurement of both dispositional and state self-forgiveness has largely focused on positive self-regard as the end-state of the self-forgiveness process (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Wenzel et al., 2012). However, such an approach has been deemed to be problematic. In particular, Hall and Fincham (2005) argued that, at a measurement level, operationalising self-forgiveness as simply a restoration of positive self-regard would make it indistinguishable from pseudo self-forgiveness, or excusing the self by failing to accept responsibility.

Empirically, and supporting suggestions by Hall and Fincham (2005), studies have found that a number of self-forgiveness measures are unrelated to elements proposed to be key to the process of forgiving oneself, such as remorse and reparative intent. In particular, examining a number of dispositional measures including the Forgiveness of Self Scale (FOSS; Mauger et al., 1992), the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005) and the Multi-dimensional Forgiveness Scale (MFS; Tangney et al., 1999), Fisher and Exline (2006) found that these widely used measures failed to predict acceptance of responsibility,

remorse or repentance. Moreover, the HFS has been found to be strongly correlated with self-esteem ( $r=.67$ ), suggesting that it may be measuring a construct other than self-forgiveness (Strelan, 2017). Similarly, it has been suggested that the State Self-Forgiveness Scale (Wohl et al., 2008) likely measures benevolence toward the self, rather than the self-forgiveness process itself (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Taken together, the findings suggest that whilst existing measures are able to assess positive self-regard as the end-state of the self-forgiveness process, they fail to consider the process by which the offender was able to arrive there (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). A possible consequence of measuring self-forgiveness in this way, is that positive self-regard may equally be induced by narcissistic and self-serving tendencies, such as minimising blame or excusing the self of responsibility (Strelan, 2007; Wenzel et al., 2012).

Recognition of the limitations in the measurement of self-forgiveness has led researchers to shift attention away from end-state measures toward the self-forgiveness process itself. Accordingly, a number of new measures of self-forgiveness have been developed. The Differentiated Process Scales of Self-Forgiveness (DPSS; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013) is a state self-forgiveness measure comprising of three subscales: genuine self-forgiveness, self-punishing and pseudo self-forgiveness. Validation of the measure indicated that it is effective in discriminating between the three possible responses to a transgression. Additionally, the measure is proposed to capture the process of genuine self-forgiveness, a process that requires the offender to acknowledge responsibility for their wrongdoing, whilst also engaging in a reparative behaviour to enable transgressed values to be restored. It is argued that through the process of realigning to one's values, offenders may then arrive at greater self-acceptance in the face of failure. More recently, Griffin et al. (2018) proposed a dual-process measure of self-forgiveness. The dual-process model assumes that two distinct processes define the self-forgiveness process. Aligning with that proposed

by Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013), the first process requires the wrongdoer to accept responsibility for their wrongdoing, and in doing so, committing to behavioural change to ensure that values are not violated again. The second process is characterised by a restoration of positive self-regard, a process that involves replacing self-condemning emotions with self-affirming ones. Guided by their proposed model, Griffin et al., (2018) argued that measures should therefore attempt to capture the two processes as distinct but related, in facilitating genuine self-forgiveness. These recent developments regarding the measurement of self-forgiveness can be seen to be a move toward a more eudemonic understanding of self-forgiveness. That is, genuine self-forgiveness involves both the experience of emotional distress, and the ability to relieve the self from condemning emotions.

### **Determinants of Self-Forgiveness**

Further to its measurement, researchers have sought to identify important determinants of self-forgiveness. Failure to meet deeply held moral standards and values can conjure up feelings of guilt and shame. As such, the emotions of guilt and shame have been implicated in the literature on self-forgiveness and are central to its understanding (Leach, 2017). Closely related, both guilt and shame are conceptualised as states of dysphoria in response to self-criticism for a perceived failure (Dost & Yagmurlu, 2008; Gausel & Leach, 2011). Although sharing similarities, guilt and shame can also be conceptualised as distinct and distinguishable experiences (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt, linked to negative evaluation of one's behaviour (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), is synonymous with appraisals of "I did a bad thing" (Lewis, 1971). In contrast, shame involves negative evaluation of the self (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) and is tantamount to "I am bad" (Lewis, 1971). This differential focus on the self (i.e., bad behaviour versus a bad self) is proposed to lead to distinct experiences, motivations and behaviours (Lewis, 1971).

Guilt, viewed as typically less painful and devastating than shame (Lewis, 1971), can help to motivate individuals toward reparative action and encourage prosocial behaviour (Tangney et al., 2007). As such, it has been posited that guilt involves a number of elements considered to facilitate the process of forgiving oneself, including acceptance of responsibility, amends making and relational repair (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Leach, 2017; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Accordingly, guilt has been found to be positively related to self-forgiveness. Specifically, McGaffin, Lyons and Deane (2013) found that guilt-proneness was positively related to self-forgiveness, in a sample of individuals receiving residential treatment for substance abuse. Moreover, in the context of committing a specific wrongdoing, state guilt has been shown to positively predict self-forgiving responses (Griffin et al., 2016). Interestingly, one study reported an inverse relation between state guilt and self-forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2008). However, a subsequent study failed to replicate this finding, and attributed the original findings to a failure to account for the covariance between guilt and shame (Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010). As such, it was suggested that the finding of a negative association between guilt and self-forgiveness was likely confounded by experiences of shame (Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010).

In contrast to guilt, shame is viewed as a more enduring state of self-condemnation and consistently regarded as a barrier to self-forgiveness. Characterised as a generalised sense of being a bad person, dispositional shame has been shown to inhibit self-forgiveness following an interpersonal transgression (Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010). Additionally, personal distress has been found to mediate the relation between shame and self-forgiveness, suggesting that shame-prone individuals may be more vulnerable to intense negative affect, and therefore find it more difficult to forgive themselves (Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010). In addition to dispositional shame, individuals may also experience shame as a direct consequence of a specific wrongdoing or transgression. Situational in nature, state shame has

also been found to be negatively associated with self-forgiveness (Griffin et al., 2016).

Further, state shame has been shown to be positively related to self-punishment and excusing oneself (Griffin et al., 2016). Such findings suggest that, rather than promoting self-forgiving responses, when perpetrators feel ashamed, self-punishment may be viewed as a means to atone for the offense committed. Alternatively, those who feel ashamed may attempt to absolve or deflect blame by excusing themselves.

Expanding on the findings regarding guilt and shame, Leach and Cidam (2015) proposed that the nature of the failure may also be an important determinant in the self-forgiveness process. In particular, their meta-analysis reported that both guilt and shame were linked to self-improvement and pro-social outcomes when the failure was perceived to be more reparable. As such, the experience of guilt and shame may facilitate constructive responses, such as self-forgiveness, where there is a possibility for relational repair and restoration of one's social image (Leach & Cidam, 2015).

To summarise, guilt and shame appear to explain the variability in self-forgiving responses. Specifically, whilst the experience of guilt is often viewed as an aid to the self-forgiveness process, the research on shame suggests that it is a significant barrier for those attempting to forgive themselves. The research on self-forgiveness has also explored other potential determinants, such as the nature of the failure, in explaining the constructive and maladaptive responses to a wrongdoing.

## **Self-Forgiveness and Wellbeing**

### ***The Potential Benefits of Self-Forgiveness***

Described as an emotion-focused coping mechanism, the practice of self-forgiveness has been linked to a range of positive psychological and relational outcomes (Davis et al., 2015; Pelucchi et al., 2015). In particular, a meta-analytic review conducted by Davis et al. (2015) found that self-forgiveness was inversely related to state ( $r=-.30$ ) and trait anxiety ( $r=-$

.50), as well as depression ( $r=-.48$ ). Similarly, others have documented a negative association between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms ( $r=.43$ ) and self-forgiveness and perceived stress ( $r=.44$ ; Liao & Wei, 2015). Moreover, self-forgiveness has been shown to promote personal growth (Cornish & Wade, 2015), resilience (Romero et al., 2006) and hope (Toussaint et al., 2014). In contrast to the findings regarding self-forgiveness, self-*un*forgiveness has been linked to inferior psychological outcomes and reduced life satisfaction (Macaskill, 2012).

Given that self-forgiveness often occurs within interpersonal contexts, researchers have also investigated its influence on relational outcomes. Broadly, findings suggest that self-forgiveness has a positive effect on relationship quality (Davis et al., 2015). In their meta-analytic review, Davis et al., (2015) reported a moderate correlation between perceived social support and self-forgiveness. Similarly, Day and Maltby (2005) found that individuals who were more self-forgiving also reported greater levels of belonging within their social network (Day & Maltby, 2005). These findings, in addition to those relating to psychological outcomes, suggest that the ability to forgive oneself may help to promote greater relational and psychological wellbeing.

### ***The Potential Consequences of Self-Forgiveness***

The reported benefits of self-forgiveness should, however, be interpreted conservatively. Despite a number of studies examining relations between self-forgiveness and psychological wellbeing, many have utilised self-forgiveness measures which solely assess positive self-regard. As noted earlier, these measures make it difficult to discern self-forgiveness from the alternative response of pseudo self-forgiveness. Consequently, along with the reported benefits, self-forgiveness has also been shown to be associated with less empathy (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), remorse and self-condemnation (Fisher & Exline, 2006). Moreover, self-forgiveness has been linked to narcissism (Strelan, 2007).

Under certain circumstances, forgiving oneself has also been shown to perpetuate coping that is maladaptive. A review conducted by Wohl and McLaughlin (2014) suggested that self-forgiveness in the context of addiction may actually impede the motivation to change one's behaviour. Relatedly, in a study of smokers, self-forgiveness was found to be related to increased smoking and reduced readiness for change (Wohl & Thompson, 2011). In relation to gambling behaviours, self-forgiveness has been reported to be negatively linked to the stages of behavioural change (Squires et al., 2012). In explaining the findings, scholars have suggested that, in certain situations, forgiving the self may actually reduce the perceived costs of the problem behaviours and hinder motivation for behavioural change (Squires et al., 2012; Wohl et al., 2017). Additionally, it has been proposed that self-forgiveness may weaken the emotional processes, such as guilt, that promote behavioural change (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997).

In summary, self-forgiveness has been shown to be associated with both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. In particular, there is evidence to suggest that self-forgiveness is related to a range of positive psychological and relational outcomes. However, in the context of addiction, self-forgiveness has been shown to encourage sustained engagement in harmful behaviour and undermine psychological health. The mixed results regarding self-forgiveness and wellbeing may be understood with reference to the limitations surrounding the instruments used to measure self-forgiveness. Specifically, a common criticism of self-forgiveness measures is that they confound the construct of genuine self-forgiveness with that of pseudo self-forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Consequently, studies utilising such measures may only provide a limited understanding of the effect of self-forgiveness on psychological wellbeing.



### **Therapeutic and Clinical Applications of Self-Forgiveness**

With scholars purporting to its potential benefit, a number of therapeutic models of self-forgiveness have emerged. Although differences exist between models, each are characterised by processes that involve a release of self-condemning emotions (e.g., guilt and shame) and a shift toward greater self-acceptance and compassion (Cornish et al., 2017). Models have also incorporated elements of responsibility taking (Cornish & Wade, 2015; Jacinto & Edwards, 2011), acceptance of difficult affective states (Worthington, 2006) and restoration of the self through a recommitment to personal values (Enright, 1996; Jacinto & Edwards, 2011; Worthington, 2006).

Referencing these models, researchers have begun to examine the efficacy of self-forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention. Investigating a psychoeducation self-forgiveness intervention, Toussaint, Barry, Bornfriend, and Markman (2014) reported small to moderate effect sizes for between group comparisons (i.e., treatment versus wait-list control) on outcomes that included self-forgiveness ( $d = 0.74$ ), self-acceptance ( $d = 0.27$ ) and commitment to self-improvement ( $d = 0.33$ ). In addition to psychoeducation, self-directed interventions have also been found to be effective in promoting self-forgiveness, as well as reducing guilt and shame (Griffin et al., 2015). Further to this, the efficacy of self-forgiveness delivered as part of individual therapy has been evaluated. In particular, Cornish and Wade (2015) examined a self-forgiveness intervention delivered over eight sessions of individual therapy. Participants were recruited from a community setting and presented with unresolved distress related to a reported transgression. The findings indicated that compared to those assigned to the control condition, participants who completed the self-forgiveness intervention reported significantly higher levels of self-forgiveness, self-compassion, and a reduction in self-condemnation and psychological distress.

The efficacy of self-forgiveness interventions has also been explored within clinical populations. Specifically, self-forgiveness interventions have been found to be related to reduced suicide risk and addictive behaviours. In a sample of older adults recruited from a self-harm support forum, self-forgiveness was found to be associated with significantly less suicidal behaviour (Nagra et al., 2016). Among veterans, self-forgiveness has been shown to be associated with lower rates of suicide attempts (Bryan et al., 2015). In contrast, the inability to self-forgive has been shown to be related to higher incidences of self-harming behaviours (Westers et al., 2012). Self-forgiveness has also been examined within the area of addiction and has been linked to lower levels of compulsive and hypersexual behaviours (Hook et al., 2015; Turner, 2008). Examined among individuals in treatment for alcohol and drug misuse, self-forgiveness was related to greater self-acceptance (McGaffin et al., 2013). More specifically, the study reported that guilt was associated with higher levels of self-acceptance, which in turn predicted self-forgiveness. In contrast, shame was negatively associated with self-acceptance and, correspondingly, negatively predicted self-forgiveness (McGaffin et al., 2013). Findings of a relation with self-acceptance has led to suggestions that the process of self-forgiveness may closely align to acceptance-based therapies, such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (Webb et al., 2017).

Although still an emerging area of interest, preliminary findings indicate that self-forgiveness may have utility as a therapeutic and clinical intervention. However, further examination is required to explore its application across varying contexts and diverse populations.

### **Limitations of Current Research**

Despite wide interest in the concept of self-forgiveness, empirical research in the area is still relatively new and therefore not without limitations. With early conceptualisations largely focused on positive self-regard, significant limitations have been identified with

regard to the measurement of self-forgiveness. In particular, widely used measures of self-forgiveness have been criticised for tapping into the concept of pseudo self-forgiveness – a response more akin to letting oneself ‘off the hook’ – instead of genuine self-forgiveness (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

In regards to the self-forgiveness process, although the effect of guilt and shame appears to be widely established, scholars have yet to understand the underlying processes by which these two emotions may be associated with self-forgiving responses. In particular, with shame proposed to be a significant barrier (Griffin et al., 2016; Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010), research has yet to elucidate the process by which self-forgiveness may be an effective response to addressing experiences of shame. Similarly, whilst guilt has been found to positively predict self-forgiving responses, the processes explaining this relation are yet to be understood. To address the limitations surrounding relations with guilt and shame, further exploration is required to uncover and explain *how* self-condemning emotions are related self-forgiveness.

The current literature on self-forgiveness suggests that it may be related to positive psychological and relational outcomes (Davis et al., 2015). However, the findings related to self-forgiveness and wellbeing are limited by the small number of studies and should be interpreted with care given the potential confounds related to the measurement of self-forgiveness in these studies. Furthermore, although scholars have begun to explore the clinical applications of self-forgiveness, the scope of research remains narrow and requires additional investigation. For example, further research is required to understand the mechanisms by which self-forgiveness may be effective as a therapeutic intervention.

### **Summary**

Self-forgiveness is required in a range of contexts in which individuals experience self-condemning emotions. As such, there has been significant interest in the area. This paper

therefore sought to review the growing body of literature on the topic of self-forgiveness. In particular, it highlighted the significant ways in which definitions of self-forgiveness have evolved over time. Whilst early definitions focused on the maintenance of positive self-regard, recent conceptualisations suggest that self-forgiveness is also characterised by an acknowledgement of responsibility for the perceived wrongdoing, as well as a commitment to behavioural change in order to reaffirm transgressed values (Wenzel et al., 2012; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Such developments have led to criticism and re-evaluation of early measures of self-forgiveness (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2005).

This paper also examined significant predictors affecting the self-forgiveness process, specifically guilt and shame. A review of the literature indicated that whilst guilt is proposed to be a predictor of self-forgiveness (Griffin et al., 2016), shame is seen to be a significant barrier for those attempting to forgive themselves (Griffin et al., 2016; Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010). Research has also explored relations between self-forgiveness and psychological wellbeing. With findings that forgiving the self is related to positive psychological outcomes (Davis et al., 2015), scholars have also investigated the therapeutic and clinical applications of self-forgiveness. However, given the limited scope covered in the literature to date, findings regarding the utility of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy should be interpreted with care.

To address the limitations of the research on self-forgiveness, researchers should aim to utilise measures of self-forgiveness that have demonstrated validity. Furthermore, additional research is required to understand and uncover the processes by which self-forgiveness may be an effective response to experiences of self-condemning emotions. That is, *how* guilt and shame are related to self-forgiveness. Lastly, and expanding on the existing literature, future research should seek to explore the utility of self-forgiveness in a range of therapeutic and clinical settings.

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## **Self-Forgiveness: Attending to Shame and Guilt Through Psychological Flexibility**


### **Research Article**



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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the process of self-forgiveness in addressing experiences of shame. With evidence suggesting that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) interventions may be efficacious in ameliorating shame, and its overlap with the self-forgiveness process, it is proposed that psychological flexibility may provide a path from shame to self-forgiveness. Specifically, it was hypothesised that experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action – processes that underpin psychological flexibility – would mediate relations between shame and self-forgiveness. As experiences of shame and guilt can often co-vary, the study also explored this mediation relation with respect to guilt. **Method:** The study was correlational in design. A cross-sectional sample of N = 183 individuals, aged between 25 – 55 years was recruited from Prolific, an online participant site. Participants completed a survey where they were asked to recall and describe an instance that they now regret where their behaviour impacted another person and/or went against their personal values/standards. Following this, participants completed self-report measures related to shame, guilt, self-forgiveness and psychological flexibility. **Results:** Shame did not directly predict self-forgiveness. However, shame was related to self-forgiveness through values and committed action, a component of psychological flexibility. In contrast, whilst guilt positively predicted self-forgiveness, this relation did not function through psychological flexibility. **Conclusions:** The implications of the findings on the utility of self-forgiveness in addressing experiences of shame were explored.

*Key Words:* self-forgiveness, shame, guilt, psychological flexibility

*Public Health Significance:* The present study suggests that, for those attempting to forgive themselves following a moral wrongdoing or transgression, values and committed action – a component of psychological flexibility – may be helpful in addressing experiences of shame.

### **Self-Forgiveness: Attending to Shame and Guilt Through Psychological Flexibility**

Whether inadvertently or intentionally, we all do wrong. Wrongdoings that violate deeply held moral standards can elicit distressing emotions such as guilt and shame. Over time, chronic guilt and shame can lead to harsh self-punishment, eliciting defensive avoidance and externalising anger (Fisher & Exline, 2010). An alternative response is self-forgiveness. Increasingly, research on self-forgiveness suggests that it may be effective in promoting positive psychological and relational outcomes (Davis et al., 2015; Pelucchi et al., 2015). As such, self-forgiveness may be one way in which individuals can cope with the emotional distress associated with a perceived moral failure.

Much of the research and theorising has focused on self-forgiveness in the context of specific transgressions committed against others. Thus, it is presumed that guilt, rather than shame, is a significant motivator for self-forgiveness. However, when individuals present to treatment or therapy – whether they have committed a transgression or not – it is often observed that they present with generalised feelings of shame (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2011). This is problematic for self-forgiveness as shame has consistently been shown to be a poor predictor of self-forgiving responses (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Ranganathan & Todorov, 2010). Yet those experiencing shame may well benefit from self-forgiveness. Thus, the challenge for researchers, and a potential benefit to practitioners and their clients, is to uncover the process by which self-forgiveness can also be an effective response to both generalised and situation-specific shame. In particular, with evidence suggesting that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) interventions may be efficacious in attenuating experiences of shame (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013; Luoma et al., 2012), and its similarities with the self-forgiveness process, it is proposed that a central component of ACT, psychological flexibility, may enable a path from shame to self-forgiveness.

### **Self-Forgiveness**

The earliest conceptualisation of self-forgiveness described it as “a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one’s acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity and love toward oneself” (Enright, 1996, p. 115). This description highlighted a number of key components. Importantly, self-forgiveness occurs in light of an “objective wrong”. Thus, self-forgiveness is required only when a moral wrongdoing has been committed; in its absence, there is nothing to forgive. Additionally, self-forgiveness requires the meaningful interpretation and release of self-directed negative emotions, and an increase in positive emotions, such as compassion and generosity toward oneself.

More recent conceptualisations propose that self-forgiveness extends further than just showing kindness toward oneself. Specifically, it has been suggested that self-forgiveness involves the experience of self-condemnation, and the ability to maintain positive self-regard in the presence of distressing emotions (Woodyatt et al., 2017). It requires the offender to recognise their culpability in the wrongdoing, experience the resultant emotions and engage in reparative action to restore a sense of a moral self (Holmgren, 1998). Through this process, transgressed values may then be reaffirmed (Wenzel et al., 2012). These features differentiate self-forgiveness from the alternative responses of self-punishment and pseudo self-forgiveness. Self-punishment is described as an attempt at restoration of justice characterised by blaming and punishing the self (Exline et al., 2011). Pseudo self-forgiveness, on the other hand, is an attempt to circumvent the forgiveness process by denying responsibility and avoiding negative emotions, akin to excusing or letting oneself ‘off the hook’ (Dillon, 2001).

Despite differing conceptualisations, there appears to be agreement that self-forgiveness requires the meaningful interpretation of a transgressed wrong, such that appropriate responsibility is acknowledged and efforts are made to rectify the wrongful behaviour—whether towards others or solely in relation to self-injurious actions, feelings,



and cognitions. In doing so, self-forgiveness can help to resolve the psychological distress caused by one's transgressed wrong, while also facilitating greater self-acceptance.

### **The Effect of Guilt and Shame on Self-Forgiveness**

Failure to meet deeply held moral standards and values can conjure up feelings of guilt and shame. As such, guilt and shame have been implicated in the literature on self-forgiveness and are central to its understanding (Leach, 2017). Closely related, both guilt and shame are conceptualised as states of dysphoria in response to self-criticism for a perceived failure (Dost & Yagmurlu, 2008; Gausel & Leach, 2011). This shared feature can make it difficult to discriminate between the two experiences. Moreover, findings of a high covariance between guilt and shame (e.g., Griffin et al., 2016 and McGaffin et al., 2013), indicate that the two experiences can often co-occur (Tangney, 1996). Although sharing similarities, guilt and shame can also be conceptualised as distinct and distinguishable experiences (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt, linked to negative evaluation of one's behaviour (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), is synonymous with appraisals of "I did a bad thing" (Lewis, 1971). In contrast, shame involves negative evaluation of the self (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) and is tantamount to "I am bad" (Lewis, 1971). This differential focus on the self (i.e., bad behaviour versus a bad self) is proposed to lead to distinct experiences, motivations and behaviours (Lewis, 1971).

Research on self-forgiveness has primarily examined situations whereby guilt and shame are elicited from specific transgressions against another or oneself. Within this context, guilt is believed to motivate change and considered to be an aid to self-forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Leach, 2017). Accordingly, guilt has been found to be positively related to self-forgiveness (Griffin et al., 2016; McGaffin et al., 2013). In comparison to guilt, shame is viewed as a more enduring and painful state of self-condemnation – presumably because the negative evaluation is related to one's core self and not simply one's behaviour

(Tangney et al., 2007). Consequently, shame has been found to be a significant barrier to self-forgiveness, at both the dispositional (for a review see Strelan, 2017) and state levels (e.g., Griffin et al., 2006; Hall & Fincham, 2008).

### **Understanding Psychological Flexibility in the Context of Shame and Self-Forgiveness**

Although shame is regarded as a barrier to self-forgiveness, it is proposed that psychological flexibility, which has been shown to attenuate experiences of shame (Luoma et al., 2012), may provide a traversable path from shame to self-forgiveness. Psychological flexibility is the central mechanism of change in ACT and is defined as the ability to contact the present moment fully and, based on the situation, change behaviour in a manner that aligns with one's chosen values (Hayes et al., 1999). In contrast, psychological *inflexibility* is characterised as an unwillingness to experience aversive stimuli (i.e., experiential avoidance) and a tendency to become entangled with one's thoughts (i.e., cognitive fusion; Hayes et al., 1999). Understood within these terms, psychological flexibility is underpinned by processes that help to reduce experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, while also promoting greater alignment with values through the pursuit of committed action.

The link between psychological flexibility and shame is evident in the extant literature on ACT. In particular, proponents of ACT propose that shame is a consequence of being fused to denigrating thoughts about the self (i.e., cognitive fusion), and attempts to avoid coming into contact with the associated distressing thoughts and feelings related to the experience (i.e., experiential avoidance; Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013). Cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance in turn can become a barrier to the experience of other desired qualities (i.e., values/committed action). Consequently, shame is typically accompanied by defensive acts, such as seeking to hide and denial of responsibility (Tangney et al., 2005). Rather than attempting to eliminate shame, it is posited that psychological flexibility enables individuals to notice the shame experience more fully, while reducing their desire to control

such experiences (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013). Additionally, negative self-judgements are addressed through the noticing of thoughts, disentanglement from their literal meaning, and responding to them in terms of their workability (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013). In other words, by addressing experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, psychological flexibility allows individuals to let go of their attachment to the shameful experience and, in doing so, enable attention to be shifted toward values-based action (Gutierrez & Hagedorn, 2013).

Further to addressing shame, the concept of psychological flexibility also shares significant overlap with the self-forgiveness process. In particular, psychological flexibility increases one's capacity to experience distressing emotions, and the ability to do so without undue influence or judgement, in order to pursue action that aligns to one's values (Hayes et al., 1999). Similarly, the process of genuine self-forgiveness requires the initial experience of highly painful emotions, such that they may be meaningfully appraised. Moreover, genuine self-forgiveness is contingent upon behavioural change that reflects reaffirmation of one's values (Wenzel et al., 2012), and is analogous to the concepts of values and committed action. Understood as engaging in effective action in service of one's core values, committed action, along with values, is a key component of psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 1999). Taken together, it is proposed that psychological flexibility may aid genuine self-forgiveness by enabling individuals to acknowledge a wrongdoing without judgement, or the urge to control unwanted, distressing experiences, and to respond in a manner that aligns to their core (transgressed) values.

Despite significant conceptual and theoretical overlap, only one study (McGaffin et al., 2013) has examined associations between psychological flexibility and self-forgiveness, specifically with reference to experiential avoidance. The results from the study indicated that the relation between guilt and self-forgiveness, and correspondingly, shame and self-forgiveness was mediated by experiential avoidance. Preliminary findings that experiential

avoidance may affect self-forgiving responses provides further rationale for understanding the self-forgiveness process through psychological flexibility.

### **The Present Study**

The present study aimed to explore the extent to which psychological flexibility may encourage shameful individuals to genuinely self-forgive. Psychological flexibility is underpinned by processes that help to reduce two barriers to self-forgiveness, experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, while at the same time promoting greater committed action in line with one's values. As such, the present study aimed to understand the role of these processes in predicting self-forgiveness, particularly in relation to experiences of shame. As shame may be experienced at a state and dispositional level, both were examined in the current study. Following from this, it was hypothesised that relations between state shame and self-forgiveness and, respectively, dispositional shame and self-forgiveness would be mediated by experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action (see Figure 1). More specifically, it was hypothesised that higher levels of state and dispositional shame would be associated with higher levels of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, and consequently, lower levels of self-forgiveness. It was also hypothesised that higher levels of state and dispositional shame would be associated with lower levels of values/committed action, and correspondingly, lower levels of self-forgiveness.

Although the primary aim of the present study was to examine relations between shame and self-forgiveness, experiences of shame and guilt often co-occur (Tangney, 1996). Additionally, preliminary findings indicate that the processes of psychological flexibility may also affect relations between guilt and self-forgiveness (McGaffin et al., 2013). As such, a secondary aim of the study was to understand the proposed mediation relationships in the context of experiences of guilt. In doing so, the study aimed to confirm reported positive relations between guilt and self-forgiveness. Additionally, the study sought to explore the

application of the proposed mediation model to wrongdoings and transgressions more generally, irrespective of whether the emotions of shame or guilt are elicited.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2007). For a regression analysis of up to six predictors (including covariates) based on an alpha of .05, a small to medium effect size and power of .80, a sample size of 177 was determined to be sufficient for the study. Participants were recruited from Prolific, an online participant recruitment site, and paid £0.84 upon completion of the survey. Given that an online survey methodology is prone to some frivolous responding, participants were oversampled in anticipation of attrition, with the aim of reaching approximately 250 participants. A total of 236 participants completed the survey. Of these, 49 participants did not complete the outcome measures and four participants were not included in the final data set due to rote and frivolous responding. Thus, the final sample comprised of 183 participants (93 males, 83 females, one transgender, six undisclosed). Participants ranged in age from 25 – 55 years ( $M = 36.98$ ,  $SD = 6.77$ ), with ethnic backgrounds self-identified as Caucasian (72%), Asian (9%), Hispanic/Latino (8%), other (7%) and not specified (4%).

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted online via SurveyMonkey. Following informed consent participants were asked to recall and describe an instance that they now regret where their behaviour impacted another person and/or went against their personal values/standards. Participants then completed self-report measures and provided demographic information.

## **Materials**

### ***Predictor Variables***

*State shame and state guilt* were measured using the 10-item State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994). The SSGS consists of a shame subscale (e.g., “I feel like I am a bad person;  $\alpha = .88$ ) and a guilt subscale (e.g., “I feel bad about what I have done”;  $\alpha = .81$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not feeling this way at all*; 5 = *feeling this way very strongly*). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater state shame and guilt, respectively.

*Dispositional shame* was measured using the 25-item Experience of Shame Scale (ESS; Andrews et al., 2002). The ESS measures the extent to which participants have experienced characterological, behavioural and bodily shame over the past year. Example items included “have you felt ashamed of the sort of person you are?” and “have you worried what other people think of you when you fail?”. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*; 4 = *very much*). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater trait shame. Internal consistency was high ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

### ***Mediator Variables***

*Psychological flexibility* is typically measured using the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Bond et al., 2011); however, significant concerns regarding its construct validity have been raised (Wolgast, 2014). As such, the present study estimated psychological flexibility with reference to the sub-processes of experiential avoidance/acceptance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action.

*Experiential avoidance/acceptance* was measured using the 15-item Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ; Gamez et al., 2014). Items included “when unpleasant memories come to me, I try to put them out of my mind” and “fear and anxiety won’t stop me from doing something important” (reverse-scored). Rated from 1 (*strongly*

*disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), responses were averaged with higher scores indicating greater avoidance. Internal consistency was high ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Cognitive fusion* was measured with the 7-item Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (CFQ; Gillanders et al., 2014). The CFQ is a measure of the extent to which thoughts exert undue influence on behaviour (e.g., “my thoughts cause me distress or emotional pain”;  $\alpha = .93$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *never true*; 7 = *always true*) and responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater cognitive fusion.

*Values/committed action* was measured using the 10-item Valuing Questionnaire (VQ; Smout et al., 2014). The VQ includes a Progress (e.g., “I continued to get better at being the kind of person I want to be”) and Obstruct subscale (e.g., “when things didn’t go according to plan, I gave up.”). Participants rated the extent to which items represented how they typically behaved (1 = *not true at all*; 7 = *completely true*). Items on the Obstruct scale were reversed-scored and combined with those on the Progress scale to form a single measure ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater values/committed action.

### ***Outcome Variable***

*Self-forgiveness* was measured using the seven items on the genuine self-forgiveness subscale (e.g., “I have tried to think through why I did what I did”;  $\alpha = .84$ ) of the Differentiated Process Self-Forgiveness Scale (DPSS; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement.

### ***Background Variables***

Because of the correlational, recall nature of the study, information relating to the transgression itself was collected, primarily for descriptive purposes, but also to control for their potential influence on relations under investigation. Thus, *severity* of the transgression

was measured with three items (i.e., “what I did was hurtful”, “I am still negatively affected by the event” and “compared to other hurtful things I have done, this was the most hurtful”;  $\alpha = .59$ ), *acceptance of responsibility* was measured with four items (i.e., “I feel I was responsible for what happened”, “I did not really do anything wrong” [reverse-scored], “I wasn’t really to blame for this” [reverse-scored] and “I was in the wrong in the situation”;  $\alpha = .82$ ) and *reparative effort* was measured with two items (i.e., “I have tried to make amends for my behaviour” and “I have apologised or tried to do something to make the situation right”;  $\alpha = .86$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very true*) and responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement.

Prior research indicates that individuals may experience greater levels of shame when there is a history of physical and/or emotional abuse (Ross et al., 2019). As such, seven items adapted from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998) were used to measure the extent to which participants had encountered *adverse experiences* (e.g., “did a parent or caregiver often push, grab, slap, throw something at you, or otherwise attack or harm you?” and “did you often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special”). Participants indicated whether they had or had not experienced each adverse event by responding with either *yes* or *no*, respectively. Responses of *yes* were summed, with higher scores indicative of greater incidences of adverse experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The current study was approved by the University of Adelaide School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Subcommittee. Participants were reassured that responses provided would remain anonymous and confidential. Given the nature of the study, details and advice to seek assistance were provided, in the event that participants experienced any distress as a result of participation in the study.



## Results

### Transgression and Transgressor Characteristics

Participants recalled transgressions committed against friends (27%), romantic partners (21%), family members (17%), work colleagues (13%), the self (9%) and other (13%). Reported transgressions involved abuse (physical, psychological, verbal), betrayal (e.g., lying, sexual infidelity, theft) and relapsing with drugs and alcohol. On average, transgressions occurred 6.67 years earlier ( $SD = 8.63$  years) and were of moderate severity ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). In general, participants reported themselves as moderately self-forgiving ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). On average, low levels of state ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and dispositional shame ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and moderate levels of state guilt ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) were reported. Participants indicated, generally, that they accepted responsibility for their wrongdoing ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) and made some attempt at reparative effort ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ). Participants also indicated that, on average, they had experienced 2.46 ( $SD = 1.72$ ) adverse experiences across their lifespan.

A one sample  $t$ -test indicated that participants' ratings of self-forgiveness were significantly higher than the midpoint ( $p < .000$ ). Ratings for state shame were significantly lower ( $p < .000$ ) than the midpoint, and ratings for state guilt ( $p = .15$ ) and dispositional shame ( $p = .11$ ) did not differ significantly from the midpoint of the respective scales (i.e., *feeling this way somewhat and a little*). Participants rated the severity of the transgression, their attempts at reparative effort and acceptance of responsibility significantly higher than the midpoint of the respective scales (all  $ps < .001$ ).

### Bivariate Relations Between Key Variables

The bivariate correlations between predictor, mediator, outcome and background variables are summarised in Table 1. First, both state shame and state guilt were positively correlated with self-forgiveness. The relation between dispositional shame and self-

forgiveness was non-significant. Second, state shame, dispositional shame and state guilt were all positively correlated with experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion. Similarly, all three predictor variables were negatively related to values/committed action. Third, none of the mediator variables were significantly correlated with self-forgiveness. Lastly, all three predictor variables were significantly correlated with each other.

Table 1 also includes bivariate correlations between the background variables and the predictor and mediator variables. First, severity was positively correlated with state shame and guilt, self-forgiveness and cognitive fusion. Second, acceptance of responsibility was positively related to state shame, dispositional shame, state guilt and self-forgiveness. Third, reparative effort was positively correlated with self-forgiveness. Lastly, adverse experiences were positively correlated with dispositional shame and cognitive fusion.

### **Testing of the Mediation Models**

To examine the mediation relationships, Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (version 3.4; Model 4; 5000 iterations; bias corrected; 95% confidence interval) was employed. Mediation is statistically significant when the lower and upper bound of corrected confidence intervals relating to the indirect effect does not contain zero. A series of parallel mediation models (PROCESS Model 4) were run, with experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action entered as parallel mediators. State shame, dispositional shame and state guilt were each entered as the predictor, respectively, and self-forgiveness as the outcome variable.

As indicated by bivariate correlations, state guilt was significantly correlated with both state and dispositional shame. Accordingly, and in line with previous studies (e.g., Griffin et al., 2016; McGaffin et al., 2013), these covariances were controlled for in the analyses. Specifically, mediation models for state and dispositional shame were run controlling for state guilt, and the mediation analysis of state guilt was conducted controlling

for state and dispositional shame<sup>1</sup>.

### ***The Effect of State Shame on Self-Forgiveness Through Psychological Flexibility***

As can be seen from Figure 2, state shame was positively associated with experiential avoidance ( $B = 0.274, p = .003$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 0.503, p < .000$ ), and negatively with values/committed action ( $B = -0.483, p < .000$ ). In turn, values/committed action was associated with self-forgiveness ( $B = 0.136, p = .005$ ). Experiential avoidance ( $B = -0.015, p = .816$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 0.030, p = .501$ ) were not associated with self-forgiveness. There was evidence of a mediation effect with the total effect (TE) of state shame on self-forgiveness ( $TE = -0.083, p = .196$ ) reducing with the inclusion of the mediators in the equation (direct effect; DE) ( $DE = -0.028, p = .672$ ). The indirect effect was significant through values/committed action ( $B = -0.068, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{BCa}} [-0.133, -0.013]$ ), but not experiential avoidance ( $B = -0.042, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{BCa}} [-0.046, 0.033]$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{BCa}} [-0.033, 0.069]$ ).

### ***The Effect of Dispositional Shame on Self-Forgiveness Through Psychological Flexibility***

As can be seen from Figure 3, dispositional shame was positively associated with experiential avoidance ( $B = 0.562, p < .000$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 1.12, p < .000$ ), and negatively with values/committed action ( $B = -0.583, p < .000$ ). In turn, values/committed action was associated with self-forgiveness ( $B = 0.142, p = .003$ ). Experiential avoidance ( $B = -0.019, p = .780$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 0.18, p = .719$ ) were not associated with self-forgiveness. There was evidence of a mediation effect with the total effect of dispositional shame on self-forgiveness ( $TE = -0.038, p = .564$ ) reducing with the inclusion of the mediators in the equation ( $DE = 0.035, p = .664$ ). The indirect effect was significant through values/committed action ( $B = -0.083, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{BCa}} [-0.166, -0.019]$ ), but not experiential

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<sup>1</sup> Based on significant correlations with predictor, mediator and outcome variables, supplementary analyses were conducted controlling for severity, time elapsed and adverse experiences. Notably, the associated results for all three predictor variables were consistent with the main findings.

avoidance ( $B = -0.010$ , 95%  $CI_{BCa} [-0.090, 0.061]$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = 0.020$ , 95%  $CI_{BCa} [-0.099, 0.133]$ ).

### ***The Effect of State Guilt on Self-Forgiveness Through Psychological Flexibility***

As can be seen from Figure 4, state guilt was not associated with experiential avoidance ( $B = -0.060$ ,  $p = .508$ ), cognitive fusion ( $B = -0.140$ ,  $p = .235$ ) or values/committed action ( $B = 0.201$ ,  $p = .09$ ). Values/committed action was associated with self-forgiveness ( $B = 0.138$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Experiential avoidance ( $B = -0.019$ ,  $p = .781$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $B = .020$ ,  $p = .691$ ) were not associated with self-forgiveness. The indirect effect was non-significant through values/committed action ( $B = 0.028$ , 95%  $CI_{BCa} [-0.007, 0.078]$ ), experiential avoidance ( $B = 0.001$ , 95%  $CI_{BCa} [-0.011, 0.023]$ ) and cognitive fusion ( $b = -0.003$ , 95%  $CI_{BCa} [-0.030, 0.015]$ ). Thus, there was no evidence of a mediation effect ( $TE = 0.396$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $DE = 0.370$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between shame and self-forgiveness, and the process by which self-forgiveness can be an effective response to experiences of shame. Specifically, the study investigated the extent to which experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action may help to explain relations between shame and self-forgiveness. The findings provided evidence that the relationship between shame and self-forgiveness was mediated by values/committed action. Although state and dispositional shame did not directly predict self-forgiveness, they did so through values/committed action. That is, state and dispositional shame reduced values-based action which, in turn, reduced self-forgiveness. To the extent that the indirect effects through values/committed action were in a negative direction, suggests that at lower levels, state and dispositional shame reduced actions in accordance with values and, consequently, reduced

self-forgiveness. Notably, both state and dispositional shame were associated with experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, however, they did not affect self-forgiveness.

A secondary purpose of the study was to understand experiences of guilt, and the extent to which experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion and values/committed action may also explain the process by which guilt is related to self-forgiveness. The findings indicated that although guilt was associated with self-forgiveness, this relation did not function through any of the psychological flexibility measures.

Overall, whilst psychological flexibility did not mediate the relation between guilt and self-forgiveness, the findings suggested that for experiences of shame, values and committed action may be a possible mechanism by which self-forgiveness can be an effective response.

### **The Effects of Shame and Guilt on Self-Forgiveness**

The prevailing literature indicates that experiences of shame and guilt are significant determinants of self-forgiveness. Within the context of self-forgiveness, shame has been shown to negatively predict self-forgiveness, and such findings have been reported for both state (Griffin et al., 2016) and dispositional shame (Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010). The present study did not find a negative relation between shame and self-forgiveness. However, results of a non-significant relation between dispositional shame and self-forgiveness similarly indicate that experiences of shame can make it difficult and inhibit the ability to forgive oneself. Alternatively, shame may be more likely associated with responses of self-punishment or pseudo self-forgiveness (Griffin et al., 2016). Although the present study found a positive relation between state shame and self-forgiveness, this association was no longer significant when guilt was controlled for, and suggests that the observed relation operated through state guilt, rather than state shame. In addition, the findings of a significant correlation between shame and guilt highlight the inherent difficulties in discriminating

between the two emotions, and are contrary to suggestions that they are distinct and distinguishable experiences (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Although experiences of guilt and shame may be difficult to disentangle, it has been suggested that they activate different motivations and behaviours (Lewis, 1971). Consequently, in contrast to shame, guilt has been shown to facilitate self-forgiveness with studies demonstrating a positive relation (Griffin et al., 2016; McGaffin et al., 2013). The finding that guilt positively predicts self-forgiveness was replicated in the current study, indicating that guilt can motivate constructive change (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) – presumably because one’s actions can be separated from the self. In contrast to guilt, the results regarding shame were consistent with the suggestion that it is a more aversive state of self-criticism and therefore less constructive than guilt (Leach, 2017). As such, whilst experiences of guilt appeared to encourage efforts toward self-improvement and aided the self-forgiveness process, the results indicated that shame was likely associated with self-castigation and avoidance of the failure and its consequences, responses that were unrelated to self-forgiveness.

### **The Role of Psychological Flexibility in Attending to Experiences of Shame and Guilt**

The literature on self-forgiveness indicates that experiences of shame significantly impede the ability to forgive oneself (Leach, 2017). However, scholars have yet to uncover the process by which self-forgiveness may be an effective means of responding to experiences of shame. As such, the present study proposed that psychological flexibility, with its links to shame and the self-forgiveness process, may be one way in which individuals may be able to forgive themselves following experiences of shame.

Focused on the underlying processes of psychological flexibility, the present study found that the link between shame and self-forgiveness functioned through values and committed action. The results are therefore somewhat consistent with the previous finding

that the process of self-forgiveness is contingent upon reaffirmation of values (Wenzel et al., 2012). As indicated by their research, Wenzel and colleagues suggested that committing to behavioural change to reaffirm transgressed values is one way in which offenders can declare that their wrongdoing is not representative of their true self. Relatedly, the process of values reaffirmation is proposed to promote greater acceptance of a flawed and imperfect self and enables positive self-regard to be restored (Wenzel et al., 2012). With reference to perceptions of the self, the process proposed by Wenzel et al. (2012) may also help to explain the role of values and committed action in facilitating self-forgiveness in the context of shame. Following experiences of shame associated with a specific wrongdoing, engaging in values-driven action may help individuals to recognise and accept their responsibility for their transgressed wrong, while also effectively signalling to themselves, and others, that they are committed to restoring those values that were violated as a result of the wrongdoing. Through committed action that aligns to one's values, shameful individuals may then be able to release their attachment to self-denigrating thoughts related to their transgressed wrong, repair their self-perception and, in turn, forgive themselves.

The present study also found that relations between self-forgiveness and state and dispositional shame, respectively, did not operate through experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion. Such results are contrary to the finding that experiential avoidance mediated the link between shame and self-forgiveness, as reported by McGaffin and colleagues (2013). A reason for the discrepancy in findings may correspond to the differences in sampling. In particular, the current study sampled from a non-clinical population exhibiting low levels of shame, whereas McGaffin et al., (2013) sampled a high-shame, clinical population. In a high shame population, individuals experience greater distress, likely resulting in increased attempts to avoid contact with aversive stimuli. As such, arriving at self-forgiveness – when the experience of shame is high – may require additional effort in attending to, and

attempting to reduce experiential avoidance. Similarly, cognitive fusion, as with experiential avoidance, may assume a more prominent role in the process of self-forgiveness as the intensity of the shame experience increases. That is, self-denigrating thoughts may be more entrenched and require greater attention in the self-forgiveness process for individuals experiencing high shame.

In addition to findings regarding shame, the results of the current study indicated that psychological flexibility did not mediate the relation between guilt and self-forgiveness. Although state guilt was positively associated with self-forgiveness, its relations with the processes of psychological flexibility were non-significant. In other words, unlike shame, experiences of guilt did not induce experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion or a reduction in values-based action. Thus, the ability to forgive oneself, in the context of guilt, did not appear to be contingent on psychological flexibility.

### **Implications**

The findings of the current study help to further understanding relations between shame and self-forgiveness and, accordingly, guilt and self-forgiveness. By examining the experiences of guilt and shame together, the study was able to provide evidence for their differential effect on self-forgiveness. Importantly, findings of a high covariance between shame and guilt also reiterate the need to consider their respective confounding effect when examining relations with self-forgiveness.

In addition to confirming direct relations, the present study provided preliminary evidence for understanding the function of self-forgiveness in remedying the harmful effects of shame. Knowing how shame may be addressed through the process of self-forgiveness can help to inform clinical interventions, especially with generalised levels of shame often observed in therapeutic settings (Tangney & Dearing, 2011). The current study highlighted the significance of psychological flexibility and, in particular, values and committed action as



an important component of the self-forgiveness process. Although values and committed action is an explicit process of ACT, findings from the present study indicate that its application may extend to other therapeutic approaches. Relatedly, consistent findings across the research domains of ACT and self-forgiveness lend weight to adopting a more integrative and holistic approach in understanding the self-forgiveness process.

### **Limitations**

The present study was not without limitations. First, whilst the study sought to maximise ecological validity by drawing on actual transgressions and responses, self-report approaches are also limited by participants' introspective ability. In particular, the present study relied on participants' ability to honestly and objectively appraise their responses to transgressions. Second, the present study employed a cross-sectional and correlational design. Consequently, care should be taken in ascribing causality. In particular, correlational studies do not enable the direction of interactions to be determined. For example, it was not possible to determine whether shame and guilt preceded attempts to cope with the offense. Third, the study utilised convenience sampling. Although sample diversity was observable in some aspects (e.g., age and gender), it was relatively homogenous with respect to reported levels of shame. Specifically, the sample consisted of participants who generally reported low levels of shame. As such, the findings are limited and may not be generalisable to more shameful experiences. Similarly, there was a lack of diversity in regards to reported cultural identity (i.e., participants were largely of Caucasian/Western background). Accordingly, conclusions may have limited generalisability across individuals of differing cultural backgrounds, particularly where cultural beliefs (e.g., individualistic versus collectivist) influence conceptualisations of guilt, shame and self-forgiveness.

### **Future Research Directions**

To address the limitations of the present study, future studies may wish to incorporate experimental and longitudinal designs. In particular, an experimental design would allow for variables to be manipulated, therefore enabling inferences of causation to be made. Future studies may also wish to employ a longitudinal design. Such designs would enable researchers to establish whether guilt, shame and psychological flexibility preceded self-forgiveness, and therefore infer causal relations.

As the current study utilised convenience sampling, further research is required to understand relations between shame, guilt, psychological flexibility and self-forgiveness in other populations of interest, such as clinical populations where individuals are likely to exhibit higher levels of shame and guilt. Additionally, given the equivocal findings regarding cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance, further examination is required to understand their potential role in relations between self-forgiveness and shame and guilt, respectively. Future studies may also wish to explore alternative mediators to further understand the underlying process explaining the relation between guilt and self-forgiveness. Lastly, studies should aim to utilise culturally diverse samples to investigate the relevance and applicability of the findings across cultures.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from the present study make important contributions to the understanding of self-forgiveness. It provided further empirical evidence supporting the differential effects of experiences of shame and guilt on the ability to self-forgive. Additionally, the findings of the study offer insights into *how* the process of self-forgiveness may effectively remedy the toxic effects of shame. As such, they have meaningful implications for those struggling to forgive themselves as a result of a wrongdoing. In

particular, the present study highlighted the importance of values-based action in navigating the path from shame to self-forgiveness.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1

The Proposed Mediation Model

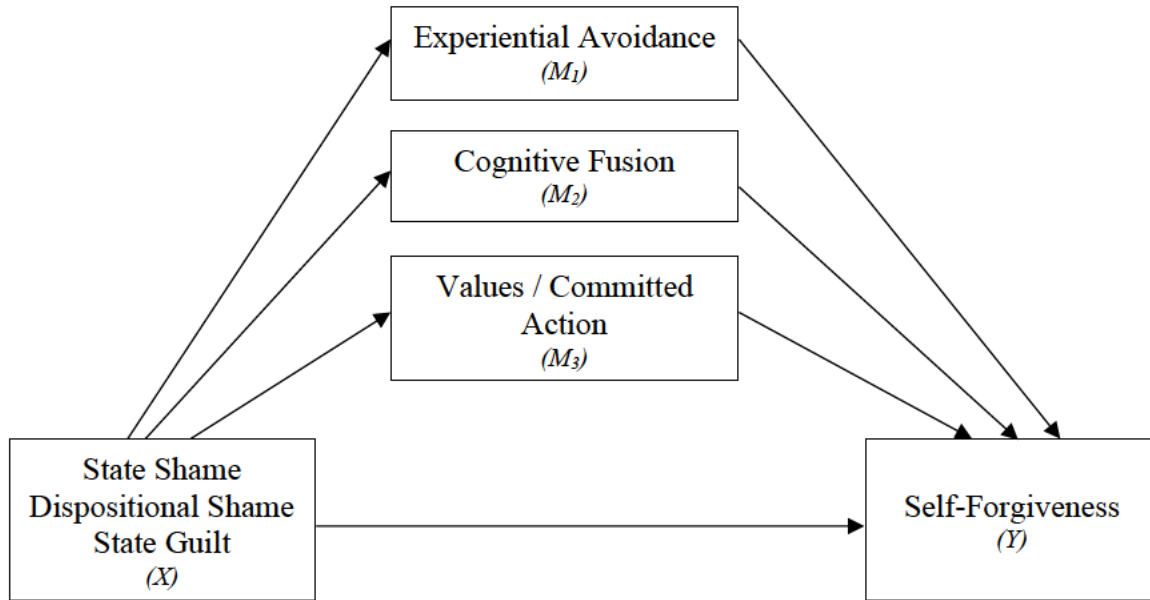
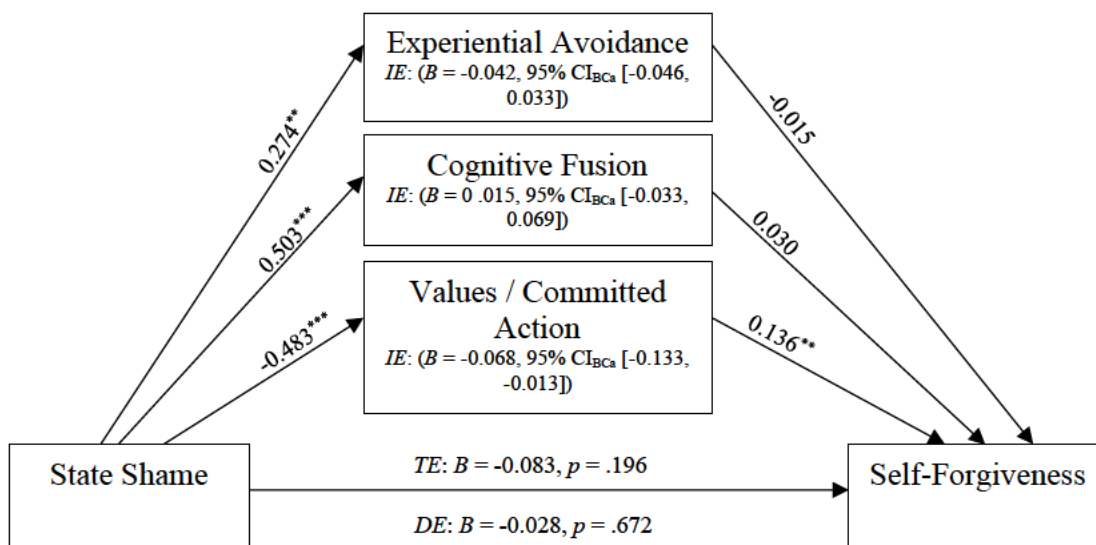


Figure 2

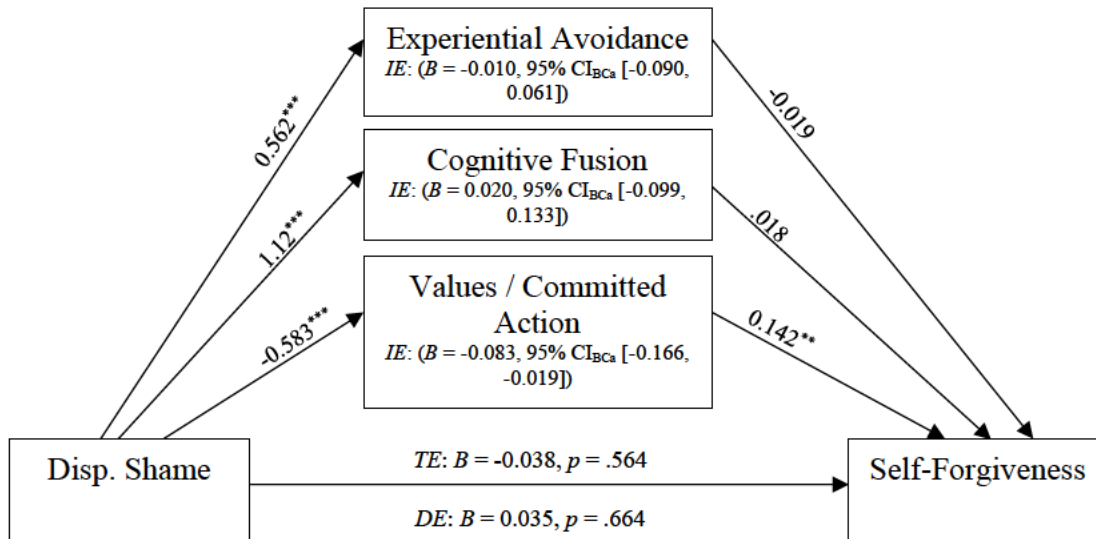
Parallel Mediation Model of Individual Processes of Psychological Flexibility Mediating the Link Between State Shame and Self-Forgiveness



Note. TE = Total Effect; DE = Direct Effect; IE = Indirect Effect; \*\*\* p<.001; \*\* p<.01; \* p<.05

**Figure 3**

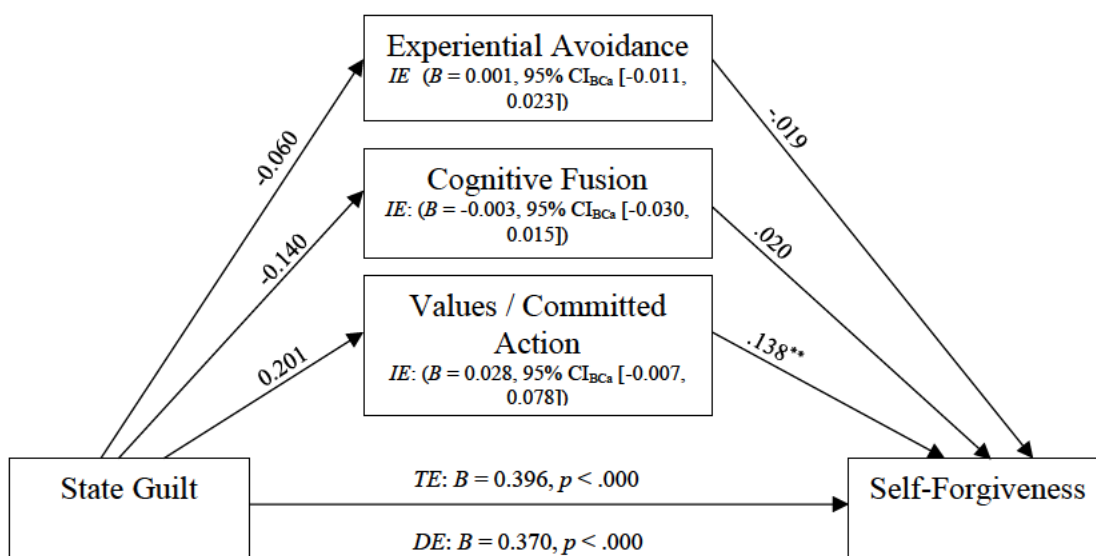
*Parallel Mediation Model of Individual Processes of Psychological Flexibility Mediating the Link Between Dispositional Shame and Self-Forgiveness*



Note. Disp. Shame = Dispositional Shame; TE = Total Effect; DE = Direct Effect; IE = Indirect Effect \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

**Figure 4**

*Model of the Relation Between State Guilt and Self-Forgiveness Through Psychological Flexibility*



Note. TE = Total Effect; DE = Direct Effect; IE = Indirect Effect; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

**Table 1***Correlations between predictor, mediator, outcome and background variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1.St.Shame	1														
2.Dis.Shame	.400***	1													
3.St.Guilt	.718***	.336***	1												
4.Exp.Avoid.	.294***	.477***	.202**	1											
5.Cog.Fus.	.355***	.632***	.236**	.616***	1										
6.Values	-.333***	-.392***	-.176*	-.513***	-.486***	1									
7.Self-Forg.	.262***	.114	.448***	-.011	.040	.135	1								
8.Severity	.365***	.098	.511***	.142	.178*	-.013	.506***	1							
9.Resp.	.148*	.183*	.328***	-.077	.009	-.023	.426***	.293***	1						
10.Repar.	.098	.045	.118	-.058	-.002	.085	.398***	.312***	.205**	1					
11.Time	-.050	-.074	-.002	-.025	-.062	-.018	.189*	.137	.030	.044	1				
12.Relatsh.	-.085	.013	-.029	-.048	-.021	.107	-.123	-.279***	-.157*	-.231**	.111	1			
13.Adv.Exp.	.077	.242**	-.008	.102	.271***	-.081	.042	-.030	.008	.013	-.013	.148*	1		
14.Gender	.104	-.002	.139	.066	-.065	-.074	.033	.048	.128	-.097	-.082	-.089	-.251**	1	
15.Age	.082	-.038	-.026	.001	-.019	.050	-.079	-.031	-.031	-.009	.237**	.051	.074	-.139	1
16.Ethnicity	-.098	-.056	-.110	-.052	-.051	-.067	.001	-.008	-.054	-.146	-.012	-.010	-.117	-.170*	.123

*Note.* St.Shame = State Shame; Dis.Shame = Dispositional Shame; St.Guilt = State Guilt; Exp.Avoid. = Experiential Avoidance; Self-Forg. = Self-Forgiveness; Resp. = Responsibility; Repar. = Reparative Effort; Relatsh. = Nature of Relationship; Adv.Exp. = Adverse Experiences;  $N = 183$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

**Appendix A: Manuscript Submission Guidelines for the Journal of Counseling  
Psychology**

**Submission**

Starting in 2012, the completion of a Manuscript Submission Checklist (PDF, 42KB) that signifies that authors have read this material and agree to adhere to the guidelines is now required. The checklist should follow the cover letter as part of the submission.

To submit to the Editorial Office of Dennis M. Kivlighan, Jr., please submit manuscripts electronically through the Manuscript Submission Portal in Microsoft Word or Open Office format.

Starting June 15, 2020, all new manuscripts submitted should be prepared according to the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. APA Style and Grammar Guidelines for the 7th edition are available.

General correspondence may be directed to

Dennis M. Kivlighan, Jr., PhD

Department of Counseling, Higher Education & Special Education

University of Maryland

3214 Benjamin Building

College Park, MD 20742

United States of America

General correspondence may be directed to the Editorial Office via email.

In addition to addresses, phone numbers, and the names of all coauthors, please supply electronic mail addresses and fax numbers of the corresponding author for potential use by the editorial office and later by the production office.

The *Journal of Counseling Psychology*® is now using a software system to screen submitted content for similarity with other published content. The system compares the initial version of each submitted manuscript against a database of 40+ million scholarly documents, as well as content appearing on the open web. This allows APA to check submissions for potential overlap with material previously published in scholarly journals (e.g., lifted or republished material).

### **Manuscript Details**

The *Journal of Counseling Psychology* publishes theoretical, empirical, and methodological articles on multicultural aspects of counseling, counseling interventions, assessment, consultation, prevention, career development, and vocational psychology and features studies on the supervision and training of counselors.

Particular attention is given to empirical studies on the evaluation and application of counseling interventions and the applications of counseling with diverse and underrepresented populations.

Manuscripts should be concisely written in simple, unambiguous language, using bias-free language. Present material in logical order, starting with a statement of purpose and progressing through an analysis of evidence to conclusions and implications. The conclusions should be clearly related to the evidence presented.

### ***Manuscript Title***

The manuscript title should be accurate, fully explanatory, and preferably no longer than 12 words.

***Abstract***

Manuscripts must be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 250 words. The abstract should clearly and concisely describe the hypotheses or research questions, research participants, and procedure. The abstract should not be used to present the rationale for the study, but instead should provide a summary of key research findings.

All results described in the abstract should accurately reflect findings reported in the body of the paper and should not characterize findings in stronger terms than the article. For example, hypotheses described in the body of the paper as having received mixed support should be summarized similarly in the abstract.

One double spaced line below the abstract, please provide up to five key words as an aid to indexing.

***Public Significance Statement***

Authors submitting manuscripts to the Journal of Counseling Psychology are required to provide a short statement of one to two sentences to summarize the article's findings and significance to the educated public (e.g., understanding human thought, feeling, and behavior and/or assisting with solutions to psychological or societal problems). This description should be included within the manuscript on the abstract/keywords page.

**Masked Review Policy**

This journal has adopted a policy of masked review for all submissions.

The cover letter should include all authors' names and institutional affiliations. Author notes providing this information should also appear at the bottom of the title page, which will be removed before the manuscript is sent for masked review.

Make every effort to see that the manuscript itself contains no clues to the authors' identity.

### **Cover Letter**

The cover letter accompanying the manuscript submission must include all authors' names and affiliations to avoid potential conflicts of interest in the review process. Provide addresses and phone numbers, as well as electronic mail addresses and fax numbers, if available, for all authors for use by the editorial office and later by the production office.

The cover letter must clearly state the order of authorship and confirm that this order corresponds to the authors' relative contributions to the research effort reported in the manuscript.

Fragmented (or piecemeal) publication involves dividing the report of a research project into multiple articles. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to publish more than one report based on overlapping data. However, the authors of such manuscripts must inform the editor in the cover letter about any other previous publication or manuscript currently in review that is based — even in part — on data reported in the present manuscript.

Authors are obligated to inform the editor about the existence of other reports from the same research project in the cover letter accompanying the current submission. Manuscripts found to have violated this policy may be returned without review.

### **Length and Style of Manuscripts**

Full-length manuscripts reporting results of a single quantitative study generally should not exceed 35 pages total (including cover page, abstract, text, references, tables, and figures), with margins of at least 1 inch on all sides and a standard font (e.g., Times New Roman) of 12 points (no smaller). The entire paper (text, references, tables, etc.) must be double spaced.

Reports of qualitative studies generally should not exceed 45 pages. For papers that exceed these page limits, authors must provide a rationale to justify the extended length in their cover letter (e.g., multiple studies are reported). Papers that do not conform to these guidelines may be returned with instructions to revise before a peer review is invited.

### **Brief Reports**

In addition to full-length manuscripts, the journal will consider brief reports. The brief reports format may be appropriate for empirically sound studies that are limited in scope, reports of preliminary findings that need further replication, or replications and extensions of prior published work.

Authors should indicate in the cover letter that they wish to have their manuscript considered as a brief report, and they must agree not to submit the full report to another journal.

The brief report should give a clear, condensed summary of the procedure of the study and as full an account of the results as space permits.

Brief reports are generally 20–25 pages in total length (including cover page, abstract, text, references, tables, and figures) and must follow the same format requirements as full length manuscripts. Brief reports that exceed 25 pages will not be considered.

### **Manuscript Preparation**

Prepare manuscripts according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association using the 7th edition. Manuscripts may be copyedited for bias-free language (see Chapter 5 of the Publication Manual).



Double-space all copy. Other formatting instructions, as well as instructions on preparing tables, figures, references, metrics, and abstracts, appear in the Manual. Additional guidance on APA Style is available on the APA Style website.

Below are additional instructions regarding the preparation of display equations, computer code, and tables.

### *Display Equations*

We strongly encourage you to use MathType (third-party software) or Equation Editor 3.0 (built into pre-2007 versions of Word) to construct your equations, rather than the equation support that is built into Word 2007 and Word 2010. Equations composed with the built-in Word 2007/Word 2010 equation support are converted to low-resolution graphics when they enter the production process and must be rekeyed by the typesetter, which may introduce errors.

To construct your equations with MathType or Equation Editor 3.0:

- Go to the Text section of the Insert tab and select Object.
- Select MathType or Equation Editor 3.0 in the drop-down menu.

If you have an equation that has already been produced using Microsoft Word 2007 or 2010 and you have access to the full version of MathType 6.5 or later, you can convert this equation to MathType by clicking on MathType Insert Equation. Copy the equation from Microsoft Word and paste it into the MathType box. Verify that your equation is correct, click File, and then click Update. Your equation has now been inserted into your Word file as a MathType Equation.

Use Equation Editor 3.0 or MathType only for equations or for formulas that cannot be produced as Word text using the Times or Symbol font.

### ***Computer Code***

Because altering computer code in any way (e.g., indents, line spacing, line breaks, page breaks) during the typesetting process could alter its meaning, we treat computer code differently from the rest of your article in our production process. To that end, we request separate files for computer code.

### ***In Online Supplemental Material***

We request that runnable source code be included as supplemental material to the article. For more information, visit [Supplementing Your Article With Online Material](#).

### **In the Text of the Article**

If you would like to include code in the text of your published manuscript, please submit a separate file with your code exactly as you want it to appear, using Courier New font with a type size of 8 points. We will make an image of each segment of code in your article that exceeds 40 characters in length. (Shorter snippets of code that appear in text will be typeset in Courier New and run in with the rest of the text.) If an appendix contains a mix of code and explanatory text, please submit a file that contains the entire appendix, with the code keyed in 8-point Courier New.

### ***Tables***

Use Word's Insert Table function when you create tables. Using spaces or tabs in your table will create problems when the table is typeset and may result in errors.

### **Academic Writing and English Language Editing Services**

Authors who feel that their manuscript may benefit from additional academic writing or language editing support prior to submission are encouraged to seek out such services at their

host institutions, engage with colleagues and subject matter experts, and/or consider several vendors that offer discounts to APA authors.

Please note that APA does not endorse or take responsibility for the service providers listed. It is strictly a referral service.

Use of such service is not mandatory for publication in an APA journal. Use of one or more of these services does not guarantee selection for peer review, manuscript acceptance, or preference for publication in any APA journal.

### **Submitting Supplemental Materials**

APA can place supplemental materials online, available via the published article in the PsycARTICLES® database. Please see *Supplementing Your Article With Online Material* for more details.

### **References**

List references in alphabetical order. Each listed reference should be cited in text, and each text citation should be listed in the References section.

Examples of basic reference formats:

Journal Article:

Hughes, G., Desantis, A., & Waszak, F. (2013). Mechanisms of intentional binding and sensory attenuation: The role of temporal prediction, temporal control, identity prediction, and motor prediction. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139, 133–151.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0028566>

Authored Book:

Rogers, T. T., & McClelland, J. L. (2004). *Semantic cognition: A parallel distributed processing approach*. Cambridge, MA: MIT

Press. Chapter in an Edited Book:

Gill, M. J., & Sypher, B. D. (2009). Workplace incivility and organizational trust. In P. Lutgen-Sandvik & B. D. Sypher (Eds.), *Destructive organizational communication: Processes, consequences, and constructive ways of organizing* (pp. 53–73). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

## **Figures**

Graphics files are welcome if supplied as Tiff or EPS files. Multipanel figures (i.e., figures with parts labeled a, b, c, d, etc.) should be assembled into one file.

The minimum line weight for line art is 0.5 point for optimal printing.

For more information about acceptable resolutions, fonts, sizing, and other figure issues, please see the general guidelines.

When possible, please place symbol legends below the figure instead of to the side.

APA offers authors the option to publish their figures online in color without the costs associated with print publication of color figures.

The same caption will appear on both the online (color) and print (black and white) versions.

To ensure that the figure can be understood in both formats, authors should add alternative wording (e.g., "the red (dark gray) bars represent") as needed.

For authors who prefer their figures to be published in color both in print and online, original color figures can be printed in color at the editor's and publisher's discretion provided the author agrees to pay:

\$900 for one figure. An additional \$600 for the second figure. An additional \$450 for each subsequent figure

### **Permissions**

Authors of accepted papers must obtain and provide to the editor on final acceptance all necessary permissions to reproduce in print and electronic form any copyrighted work, including test materials (or portions thereof), photographs, and other graphic images (including those used as stimuli in experiments).

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### **Publication Policies**

APA policy prohibits an author from submitting the same manuscript for concurrent consideration by two or more publications.

See also APA Journals® Internet Posting Guidelines.

APA requires authors to reveal any possible conflict of interest in the conduct and reporting of research (e.g., financial interests in a test or procedure, funding by pharmaceutical companies for drug research).

[Download Disclosure of Interests Form \(PDF, 38KB\)](#)

In light of changing patterns of scientific knowledge dissemination, APA requires authors to provide information on prior dissemination of the data and narrative interpretations of the data/research appearing in the manuscript (e.g., if some or all were presented at a conference or meeting, posted on a listserv, shared on a website, including academic social networks like

ResearchGate, etc.). This information (2–4 sentences) must be provided as part of the Author Note.

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Publication Rights (Copyright Transfer) Form (PDF, 83KB)

For manuscripts funded by the Wellcome Trust or the Research Councils UK

Wellcome Trust or Research Councils UK Publication Rights Form (PDF, 34KB)

### **Ethical Principles**

It is a violation of APA Ethical Principles to publish "as original data, data that have been previously published" (Standard 8.13).

In addition, APA Ethical Principles specify that "after research results are published, psychologists do not withhold the data on which their conclusions are based from other competent professionals who seek to verify the substantive claims through reanalysis and who intend to use such data only for that purpose, provided that the confidentiality of the participants can be protected and unless legal rights concerning proprietary data preclude their release" (Standard 8.14).

APA expects authors to adhere to these standards. Specifically, APA expects authors to have their data available throughout the editorial review process and for at least 5 years after the date of publication.

Authors are required to state in writing that they have complied with APA ethical standards in the treatment of their sample, human or animal, or to describe the details of treatment.

The APA Ethics Office provides the full Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct electronically on its website in HTML, PDF, and Word format. You may also request a copy by emailing or calling the APA Ethics Office (202-336-5930). You may also read "Ethical Principles," December 1992, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 47, pp. 1597–1611.

**Other Information**

Visit the Journals Publishing Resource Center for more resources for writing, reviewing, and editing articles for publishing in APA journals.

## Appendix B: Survey

### Understanding Responses to Wrongoings which Violate Personal Values

#### Information about this study

This study is part of a project run at the University of Adelaide by [REDACTED] under the supervision of [REDACTED]. It has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee of the University of Adelaide's School of Psychology (HREC Approval Number xxxx).

#### What is the project about?

Whether inadvertently or intentionally, we all do wrong. Wrongoings which violate personally held values can elicit distressing emotions. This study aims to investigate ways in which we may better cope with such distress.

#### What are the requirements for participation?

You must be 18 years or over and fluent in English to participate in this study.

#### What will be involved?

This survey requires you to recall an instance where you have committed a wrongdoing/offence that went against your personal values/standards. You'll then be asked to answer some questions about the incident and yourself. This will include questions about any adverse experiences you may have encountered in your life (e.g. where someone caused you physical and/or emotional harm).

The survey will take around 10 minutes to complete. Please complete it in one sitting without interruption.

#### Are there any risks associated with participating?

It is possible that you may experience some emotional discomfort when reflecting on a past wrongdoing and/or any adverse experiences you may have encountered.

Should you require support, it is encouraged that you speak to your doctor or counsellor. Alternatively, you may wish to contact a crisis support service in your country.

#### Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the survey at any time by closing your browser.

#### What will happen to my information?

**Confidentiality:** your responses will remain confidential and will not be linked to any identifying information. The information you provide will only be used as described in this participant information sheet and it will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except as required by law.

**Storage:** all survey data will be stored on a secure network drive and kept for a minimum of 5 years. Access to the data will be restricted to the researchers.



***Publishing:*** the data provided will form the research for a Master's thesis, the results of which may be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

In order to preserve anonymity, it is not possible to provide individualised feedback. However, if you would like to obtain a copy of a summary of the findings please contact the researchers on the details below.

**What if I have a complaint or any concerns?**

If you have questions about the study, or wish to raise a concern, please consult the researchers on the contact details below.



If you wish to speak with an independent person regarding concerns or a complaint, the University's policy on research involving human participants, or your rights as a participant, please contact the Convenor of the Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee (School of Psychology) on the details below.

**Professor Paul Delfabbro (paul.delfabbro@adelaide.edu.au)**

**Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.**

**\* 1. INFORMED CONSENT** - please tick this box before proceeding, if you agree:

I have read the above information and consent to participate in this study.

### Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values

#### Describe the wrongdoing

In this section, please recall a specific instance you now regret where your behaviour impacted another person and/or went against your personal values/standards. This may involve a specific action on your part (e.g. lying to a friend) or something you should have done but didn't (e.g. not speaking up when someone was bullied). Alternatively, the wrongdoing could be against yourself/your values (e.g. relapsing with alcohol/drugs).

Please be open and honest in your responses - the survey is completely anonymous.

\* 2. Describe the specific wrongdoing/offence that you regret in the space provided.

What did you do? What personal value/standard did you violate? How has it affected you?

\* 3. What is/was your relationship to the person you hurt/offended?

- Romantic partner
- Family member
- Friend
- Work colleague
- Self
- Other

\* 4. How long ago did the incident take place? Please add the amount of time that has passed. You only need to choose ONE box, we're just after an approximation.

Years

Months

Days



### Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values

\* 6. Thinking about what you did, please indicate your CURRENT thoughts and feelings.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I have tried to think through why I did what I did	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am trying to learn from my wrongdoing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have spent time working through my guilt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have put energy into processing my wrongdoing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am trying to accept myself even with my failures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Since committing the offence I have tried to change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't take what I have done lightly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What I've done is unforgivable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can't seem to get over what I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I deserve to suffer for what I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I can't look myself in the eye	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I want to punish myself for what I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I keep going over what I have done in my head	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't understand why I behaved as I did	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel the other person got what they deserved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I wasn't the only one to blame for what happened	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the other person was really to blame for what happened	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel what happened was my fault	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel angry about the way I have been treated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm not really sure whether what I did was wrong	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values**

\* 7. Continuing to think about what you did, please indicate your CURRENT feelings.

	Not feeling this way at all		Feeling this way somewhat		Feeling this way very strongly
I want to sink into the floor and disappear	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel remorse, regret	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel small	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel tension about this thing I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I am a bad person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I cannot stop thinking about this bad thing I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel humiliated, disgraced	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like apologising, confessing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel worthless, powerless	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel bad about this thing I have done	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values

\* 8. We can all feel embarrassed or self-conscious at times. These questions are about such feelings. Please indicate the response which applies to you.

#### IN THE PAST YEAR...

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much
Have you felt ashamed of any of your personal habits?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of any of your personal habits?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you tried to cover up or conceal any of your personal habits?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed of your manner with others?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of your manner with others?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you avoided people because of your manner?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed of the sort of person you are?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of the sort of person you are?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you tried to conceal from others the sort of person you are?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed of your ability to do things?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of your ability to do things?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much
Have you avoided people because of your inability to do things?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you feel ashamed when you do something wrong?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of you when you do something wrong?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you tried to cover up or conceal things you felt ashamed of having done?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed when you said something stupid?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of you when you said something stupid?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you avoided contact with anyone who knew you said something stupid?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed when you failed at something which was important to you?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried what other people think of you when you fail?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you avoided people who have seen you fail?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you felt ashamed of your body or any part of it?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you worried about what other people think of your appearance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you avoided looking at yourself in the mirror?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you wanted to hide or conceal your body or any part of it?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>









### Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values

The following questions ask about any adverse experiences you have encountered in your life.

If you experience discomfort in answering these questions, it is encouraged that you contact your doctor or counsellor to discuss this. Alternatively, you may wish to contact a mental health or crisis support service in your country.

#### AT ANY POINT IN YOUR LIFE...

\* 12. Have you **ever** had a life-threatening or chronic illness?

Yes

No

\* 13. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?

Yes

No

\* 14. Has a parent, family member, romantic partner, or someone else **often** ridiculed you, put you down, ignored you, or made you feel like you were no good?

Yes

No

\* 15. Did you **often** feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?

Yes

No

\* 16. Has anyone **ever** touched private parts of your body, made you touch their body, or tried to or actually have sex with you against your wishes?

Yes

No

\* 17. Did a parent or caregiver **often** push, grab, slap, throw something at you, or otherwise attack or harm you?

Yes

No

\* 18. Has a romantic partner, date, stranger, or someone else ~~ever~~ physically harmed you, or acted in a way that made you feel afraid that you might be physically harmed?

Yes

No

**Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values****Demographic Information**

**In this final section, you are asked to provide basic information about yourself.**

\* 19. What is your age (in whole years)?

\* 20. What gender do you identify with?

Female

Male

Transgender

Do not identify with any of the above

\* 21. What is your ethnic background? (i.e. what group or culture do you identify with?)

#### Understanding Responses to Wrongdoings which Violate Personal Values

Here is a little more information about what we are trying to investigate. Wrongdoings which violate personally held standards/values can elicit distressing emotions such as guilt and shame. One way in which we can cope with this is through self-forgiveness. As such, this study aims to investigate potential pathways toward self-forgiveness. In particular, we are interested in exploring how factors such as enactment of personal values or valued living may help us to overcome shame and move toward self-forgiveness.

Thank you for participating in this study.