

Prayer increases forgiveness

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We have all been guilty of a transgression at one time or another. That's because we're not perfect. We all commit hurtful acts, violate trust, and hope for forgiveness.

That's simply a fact, and here's another one: Nine out of 10 Americans say that they pray—at least on occasion. Florida State University psychologist Nathaniel Lambert put these two facts together and came up with an idea: Why not take all that prayer and direct it at the people who have wronged us? Is it possible that directed prayer might spark [forgiveness](#) in those doing the praying—and in the process preserve relationships?

Lambert and his colleagues decided to test this scientifically in two experiments appearing in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for [Psychological Science](#). In the first, they had a group of men and women pray one single prayer for their romantic partner's well being. Others—the experimental controls—they simply described their partner, speaking into a tape recorder.

Then they measured forgiveness. The scientists defined forgiveness as the diminishing of the initial [negative feelings](#) that arise when you've been wronged. Their results showed that those who had prayed for their partner harbored fewer vengeful thoughts and emotions: They were more ready to forgive and move on.

If one single prayer can cause such a striking difference in feelings, then what could prayer over a period of time do for a relationship? In a

second study, the researchers had a group of men and women pray for a close friend every day for four weeks. Others simply reflected on the relationship, thinking positive thoughts but not praying for their friend's well-being. They also added another dimension. They used a scale to measure selfless concern for others—not any particular person but other people generally. They speculated that prayer would increase selfless concern, which in turn would boost forgiveness.

And that's just what they found. But why? How does this common spiritual practice exert its healing effects? The psychological scientists have an idea: Most of the time, couples profess and believe in shared goals, but when they hit a rough patch, they often switch to adversarial goals like retribution and resentment. These adversarial goals shift cognitive focus to the self, and it can be tough to shake that self-focus. [Prayer](#) appears to shift attention from the self back to others, which allows the resentments to fade.

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